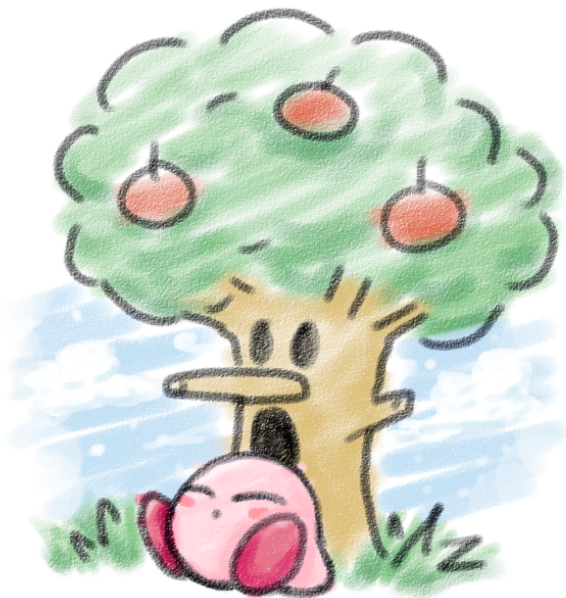


Pleasant Dreams

The Welcoming Play of Kirby's Dream Land



Joel Couture

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The Welcoming Play of *Kirby's Dream Land*

An Unofficial Examination

By Joel Couture

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For Julia & Ellie

Foreword: Kirby's Dream Land - The Perfect Game

"The original Kirby's Dream Land is very dear to me. It's a game I admire visually and technically. It features some of the best graphics on Game Boy by applying various technical tricks and utilizing smart character and sprite design that resulted in some of the most iconic character designs in all of video games. Its characters and graphics have inspired me as a pixel-artist on a daily basis and have taught me the importance of simplicity in your designs, as have all the other titles in the series.

Recently, however, I've realized that there's another reason why this game means so much to me. And it's a little odd to say this, but...

I would call Kirby's Dream Land a perfect video game.

That does not mean Kirby's Dream Land is the best game ever made. Or that it is even the best game in the Kirby franchise (it's not). What I mean by that is that if we look at Kirby's Dream Land by itself and at the goals it wants to achieve as a game, without thinking about the things further games in the series added or what could possibly have been added on top, everything that is present in Kirby's Dream Land is executed flawlessly to create a perfect package.

Kirby's Dream Land's goal is to be a game accessible for newcomers to the action game genre. Everything about Kirby's Dream Land serves this purpose.

First off, players are given a minimal moveset where the only method of attack comes down to "does Kirby have anything in his mouth right now?". If Kirby's mouth is empty, the B button will make him suck in any nearby objects and enemies. If it's full, it will spit out whatever is inside. Even power-ups that Kirby can find (a spicy curry and a refreshing mint) work this way. For a brief moment, Kirby will respectively spit out fire or puffs of air when the B button is pressed, depending on which of these power-ups he's eaten.

The above should be simple enough for newcomers, but Kirby's Dream

Land goes one step further, and I think this is where its brilliance and dedication to its goals truly shines. Because if players feel like they aren't quick enough to move and dodge things on the ground, a simple press Up makes Kirby suck in air and fly indefinitely, giving the player the option to avoid all combat and platforming and simply fly over the levels. If an airborne enemy comes into their path, pressing B will still give them the option to attack by having Kirby blow out all the air in his mouth. Should they land on the ground before they encounter an enemy or before they experiment with pressing B while airborne, Kirby automatically blows out the air in his mouth, teaching the player that this is possible.

It's such a smart little bit of design because it accomplishes a bunch of things in one go:

- 1. It naturally gives the player an option of lowering the difficulty, without making them feel like they are cheating or having a different experience from other players by turning on various options.*
- 2. It reinforces the fact that Kirby's entire moveset and means of attack is based around what he's gulped up. This removes any doubt there might be about Kirby having more moves than the player is aware of.*

Overall, Kirby's moveset is easy to master, and even new players will quickly become confident enough to not fly over everything and explore more of the game's five stages.

Honestly, five stages always seemed a bit short to me when I first played Kirby's Dream Land, but thinking about it more in recent years, I think it actually provides the perfect arc for a newcomer action game.

Green Greens and Castle Lololo serve to teach the player about the ins and outs of Kirby's Dream Land, introducing them to different concepts like the Curry powerup and enemies that can't die from Kirby's air puffs (and thus requiring the player to master sucking up and spitting out enemies to attack). Lololo himself even shows up as a midboss to teach you about how the eventual boss fight against him and his partner Lalala will play out at the end of the stage.

By the time you reach Float Islands, the game assumes you have mastered Kirby's moveset and starts ramping up a bit, culminating in the

completely unique SHMUP-style boss fight against Kabula.

Bubbly Clouds is the game's penultimate stage and this is where the difficulty hits its peak with the boss fight against Kracko. Again, half-way through the stage Kracko Jr. shows up to teach the player how to fight against his bigger self later on.

Mt. Dedede is the finale. Everything in the game returns for an encore, bosses included. It asks the player to remember what they've gone through and tests the player's skills before they face off against the final boss: King Dedede.

This kind of buildup and measuring of the player's skills over time is not a new concept to action games, obviously, but *Kirby's Dream Land's* length allows the developers to do this in rapid fire succession. The game can be completed in a single sitting, and I think that's a key component of making it approachable for newcomers. It gives them that same rush you'd get from overcoming a much larger action game.

Once the player has seen the ending credits and Kirby says his goodbyes, they're met with one more surprise: the game actually has a secret second adventure hiding inside. Inputting a secret code on the title screen, only revealed after you beat the game, will throw the player into the adventure again, this time with stronger enemies.

Beating this second adventure gives the player access to the code that unlocks the Configuration Mode, where they can challenge themselves further by adjusting Kirby's health and total lives.

Those last two extra modes might not seem to specifically be made for newcomers, but I think they actually are the perfect finishing touches. It gives the player the opportunity to have some additional practice on a harder difficulty, in a familiar environment, before finally moving on to other games.

And with that, *Kirby's Dream Land* perfectly wraps up. It goes from teaching the player the basics, to making them feel more confident, to mastering the game, all within maybe two hours tops on your first playthrough. And then tops it off by providing an encore that really puts the players to the test. It exhausts everything in its arsenal. Nothing gets underutilized, feels unpolished or is tacked on.

That's why Kirby's Dream Land is a perfect game.

And this is something that all of Masahiro Sakurai's games share. If you look at not just later Kirby games like Kirby Super Star, but also games like Kid Icarus: Uprising or the Super Smash Bros. series, you will see the same things. They are all perfect packages trying to squeeze the most out of what they provide. It's something that I try to strive for when I make graphics for games, and will continue to strive for when I decide to finally direct a game. The fact that he managed to achieve this from the get go, with a simple game like Kirby's Dream Land, is truly inspiring to me.”

– Paul Veer, Art Director for Cadence of Hyrule

Introduction

"I don't remember much about my early childhood with any clarity, but I remember the day I got Kirby's Dream Land so vividly it could have been a recent memory instead of something that happened 27 years ago. It was my first Game Boy game, and the first game that was 'mine'.

It wasn't a big game, but for a five year old, it was dense and interesting enough to play over and over trying to master - Kracko and the Bubbly Clouds stage in particular. It's the first game I remember being able to fly in, and that stage really made the most of it! Even though Kirby had yet to adopt his signature copy ability in that first outing, it was a great start to his franchise."

– Garrett Varrin, developer of JUNKPUNCHER

"No big hair. No big muscles. No weapons. Nothing. All Kirby's got is...appetite."

I don't know what it was about the ad for *Kirby's Dream Land* that sold me on it the instant I saw it. Maybe it was the cute artwork and enemies that were so far removed from the gruesome aliens and monsters I'd been used to seeing in games? Maybe it was the puffy hero that ate its enemies and could take flight with a little puff of air? Maybe it was something about Kirby being so unassuming, yet still coming out on top overall?

Maybe it was the cartoon comparison between Kirby and the musclebound, nameless hero that our adorable friend would DEVOUR WHOLE before the commercial's end?

I don't know exactly what it was (probably not the sickening ooze Kirby reduced that poor guy to WHY WERE THE 90'S SO GROSS ALL THE TIME), but the game got its hooks in me as soon as I saw it. Not that I could do anything about it at my age, but I did put in a request to get it at the next gift-giving holiday. It was going to be so

much fun when I got it!

Well, fun for a few stages. Games of the time weren't exactly within my level of skill. In the era of *Castlevania*, *Mega Man*, *Ghosts N' Goblins*, *Double Dragon*, and various other titles that were savaging kids at the time, I was not exactly known for my prowess. I enjoyed a lot of these games, but I just couldn't make it further than a level or two in each of them. I'd boot them up and give them a shot every few days, always with the hope that I'd make it a little bit further, but that was it. I didn't expect to finish any of them. I wouldn't ever get that good.

Not that I expected to good at much of anything at the time. I was a pale, clumsy child who didn't show much aptitude for anything that required skill. Especially sports, despite trying several. The dreaded gym class would often mean playing yet another sport I had no ability at, and all while the better players yelled at me to just pass them the ball, already.

It's hard to get any better at a sport with everyone screaming at you to hand off the ball without thinking, isn't it? How are you supposed to get any better if you don't have any time to practice? To play without everyone piling on you because **THE TEAM NEEDS TO WIN AT ANY COST?** So, sports kind of stressed me out, and I wanted nothing to do with them.

I was the cliché nerd. Except I wasn't any good at video games, either.

These games had been built to resist being beaten, though, so it only makes sense. Coming off of the arcade era, where games made bank based on how many coins you had to sink into them to win, home consoles hadn't really figured out that they didn't have to play that way. Developers were used to creating mountains of challenge for players to climb, and if you didn't have what it took, don't expect much in the way of help. Maybe a cheat code or two, but those would only get you so far.

As an uncoordinated kid with lousy reflexes, I was far from the type of person who was likely to finish any of these games. And it's not like I was able to practice much, either, as once these games got

hard, I tended to die in a hurry, then find myself back at the start. I'd get pretty good at those first few stages, but anything further was just a dream. Honestly, at the time, sports and games were starting to feel an awful lot alike.

I loved *Nintendo Power* during this period of my life for this reason, I think. After grabbing a few dozen issues off of some dude at a yard sale for ten cents each (and lugging them home in two huge bags that dangled from my bike's handlebars), I would read up on games, poring over the maps and tips. I got to live through beating these games in a way through these issues, with the maps unveiling those secret places I didn't think my skills would ever take me to.

Those issues were a kind of travelogue for me – a means to visit the exciting, dangerous digital places my own hands weren't able to take me to. I still derived a lot of joy from visiting them in that way, too. But I did always dream that I'd be able to see those levels for myself one day.

So, when my birthday rolled around and I found myself with a small, square gift in my hands, I was excited, but not too much. I thought I'd get through a few levels of *Kirby's Dream Land* and that would be it. I wasn't expecting a game that would change my life.

I made it most of the way through *Kirby's Dream Land* in a single sitting. For some people, that would be a problem. Who wants a game they can blow through in an afternoon? For me, though, it was the first time I'd gotten far in a game. It was the first time I'd gotten that close to beating it. It was the first time that the skills I possessed were enough to get me close to the end of a game. I think I was actually shaking from excitement, even as the Game Over screen was looming over me.

The next time I played, I made it to King Dedede, having my first experience in fighting a game's final boss. I know that I was shaking that time. I wasn't able to overcome the googly-eyed monarch, but again, I was stunned that my own hands and abilities had carried me this far. I didn't exactly know what to do to beat him, though, and so found myself failing once again.

I don't know when it came to me. I had been idly thinking about

the game and the boss fight, still marvelling that I'd almost won, when I thought about the stars that came out of King Dedede whenever he swung his hammer or jumped in the air. I'd been waiting for an enemy to get tossed into the arena like every other boss in the game so that I could suck it up and spit it back at Dedede. It never happened, leaving me puzzled as to how I could win. As I was thinking, it suddenly hit me that those stars looked an awful lot like the projectiles Kirby would spit out.

Minutes later, I was back in a chair in the living room, lamp just at my side to light up the screen.

This time, I won. For the first time ever, I beat a video game.

I have long since lost the manual for my copy of *Kirby's Dream Land*, but I remember it was the first and only time I ever wrote in the Notes section of a game manual. In it, I wrote about my experience. How my heart was pounding, but I was so happy. I had actually done it. I had finally beaten a game.

This was so beyond what I'd expected of the game. I had never hoped that I would actually beat a game, ever. I wanted to, but it just never seemed impossible. Games were insurmountable challenges for other kids to beat. For those kids with good reflexes to beat. Winning was not something I had been designed to do.

I'd just have to be happy experiencing games through screenshots and other players, because I would never get good enough. Games always demanded just too much of me, and I was never able to build the skills I needed to get there.

But here was a game that said that I was good enough. That relaxed the skill-based needs of most games of the times, and welcomed players of "lower" skill levels. That made me feel powerful and capable at my own skill level.

In a 2003 interview with Nintendo.com, Masahiro Sakurai said that "The very first *Kirby* game [*Kirby's Dream Land* for Game Boy] was designed to be a game for beginners. In the NES days, it seemed like most action games were too difficult for beginning players to complete. We developed the first *Kirby* game so that any player

could make it through the game and watch the ending. I think advanced players could probably play through that game in about an hour.” (1)

Kirby's Dream Land was made just for kids like me.

I don't know if *Kirby's Dream Land* was the first game designed to be more approachable for players whose reflexes were a bit less developed, or who couldn't quite get the buttons down as comfortably, or who were still working on aiming and fighting in a digital space. It was the first game that seemed to have been built to suit my skill level, though, and it showed me that maybe I could find a place for myself in games – that I could enjoy them without always striving to get tougher and more skilled. I could enjoy a game as who I was, without all of that pressure to succeed. Or, even if I felt that pressure, it was within my ability to make it go away by actually succeeding.

What was it about *Kirby's Dream Land* that made it so much more comfortable for me to play, though? How did it make itself less demanding for players? You could argue that it was simply easier, as it was far less challenging than most games I played at the time. Then again, so was *Rampage*.

If you remember this arcade port, *Rampage* had you cavorting around the US as a giant lizard or gorilla, bashing down buildings, smashing tanks, and eating anyone you happened to come across. You had as many lives as you wanted as you punched your way across the country, meaning anyone with the patience to do the same thing for four or five hours (maybe longer) could beat it.

I did beat *Rampage* at one point after beating *Kirby's Dream Land*, but it didn't carry that same sense of satisfaction. I didn't feel any accomplishment or positivity within me when I finished it. I just felt like I'd hit the same few buttons for a few hours until the game stopped bothering to throw more stages in my way. It felt hollow and empty, and was the first time I genuinely felt like I was wasting my time playing a game.

From what Sakurai said, *Kirby's Dream Land* was designed so that anyone could beat it. But its developers didn't just make an easy

game. They could have done that, but what they created was so, so much more.

What was the difference? What was it about *Kirby's Dream Land* that made overcoming it so enjoyable? It wasn't just that ease of play. It was the care that went into carving out its difficulty curve. The thoughtfulness that went into designing the combat and abilities. The feelings that went into each of the enemies, levels, and songs in the game.

"For some reason, most people seem to think that *Kirby* games are mainly for kids. I've never intentionally tried to make *Kirby* appealing to kids. To me, the *Kirby* series is designed as a gateway for beginning gamers," Sakurai continues. "That's why *Kirby* games are easy to play, but they also hold greater challenges for players who want to experience a tougher game. There is more than one way to play *Kirby* games, and I think kids noticed that first. I think that's why *Kirby* has become so popular among young gamers." (2)

Kirby's Dream Land was built to make you believe in yourself. It wasn't just a game that was created to help kids find SOMETHING they could beat, but a game that was meant to build you up and make you feel that you were all right. That you were good enough to accomplish what it laid out.

It struck such a careful balance between challenge and teaching. It did an incredible job of giving players the tools to make them feel safe, while also challenging them to know when and how to use them. Then, these skills, which were gently tested across the game, could be put to use in other titles. Not only did the game want to build you up, but it also taught you the skills to play through other games. It gave you a comforting, safe place to learn and grow so that you could further enjoy the world of games.

I had never seen this kind of thinking at work in games before. Had never experienced a play style that was built to ease players in, or to accept something less than the highly-skilled, optimally-abled hardcore player. It was a new attitude, and one that I feel has steadily spread to many corners of gaming, all with positive results.

Seeing the push for more play styles in games, more genres that

create games for different needs, controllers that are designed for players with varied needs, and just a general push to create games for all, is something I feel has stemmed from this one title and the design philosophy behind it. This movement to make games for everyone, and to make players of all skills and needs feel welcome, was something I first experienced back in 1992 with *Kirby's Dream Land*.

This kind of relaxed emphasis on skill was what helped me find a place in games. Now, I write books about them. Go across the world to see the unique, exciting things people are doing in games. Interview the people who are making the controllers and experiences that continually show the varied, surprising things this medium has to offer. That door was opened for me by *Kirby's Dream Land* and the feelings it gave me. That sense that I was good enough, and that I was welcome, here. That there were games for me, and that maybe I could develop the skills I needed to beat them.

I felt like I was finally someone that games weren't trying to shove out the door with their emphasis on difficulty. I felt like a game could be more than just a challenge for the reflexes, and that there was a place for people who wanted different things from games.

Maybe he had no muscles or weapons (or hair? I didn't think that was a thing). But he had heart to spare, just like the caring developers who set out to create something that would open the door to so, so many new players.

1.

“Kirby’s Dream Land was a game that allowed everyone to see everything. This defied expectations. Take Mario. He was constantly being stopped by enemies and obstacles. The tension in his first games came from being pitted against anxiety-inducing traps at a near constant pace, where the only way to survive was to run headfirst into danger, then jam the jump button at the last possible second. As for Kirby, he can eat anyone and fly over anything. If Mario works full time, then Kirby is on permanent vacation.

So, what happens when the tightrope of ‘make or break’ decisions that defined 2D platformers in the 90’s melts away? You’re left with a safety net that doubles as a trampoline. That’s where Kirby lives, and it’s where a lot of us would like to live too. That’s just part of why he’s still with us today.”

– Jonathan Holmes, Nintendo Force and Destructoid

Kirby may have had heart to spare (as did Sakurai, Iwata, Kanai, and Ishikawa), but I guess other games did, too. Just more of the bleeding, pulsating, gross alien-birthing kind.

Huge spiders. Masked killers. Ninjas. Mercenaries. Pulsating alien hearts. These were the kind of things you’d run into in video games. These creatures and armed humanoid beings were the dangers that filled the digital halls I had roamed in my youth, and most of these were more than enough to take me down.

Even in their pixelated forms, they’re a bit intimidating. The monsters in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* all had this odd level of detail that made them look a little off. The flying monsters seemed to be seeping fluid, appearing half-mashed as they buzzed about. Oh yeah, and that weird sinister chainsaw guy seemed a little too dark and real for my young self. Or how about Beebop just rushing toward you as Rocksteady stood with his gun trained on the captive

April O'Neil? Things in this game seemed just a hair darker than the playful cartoon that made me want to buy the video game (Maybe they were closer to the comic? I don't actually know. I terrible at being a nerd).

How about Abobo tearing through a mountainside to smack you around in *Double Dragon*? This massive wall of human meat that glared at you as he and his twin just mauled you? Or the bleeding heart final boss of *Contra*? Jason Voorhees rushing you in a dark cabin in *Friday the 13th*?

Arguably, you could say that many of these things looked a little silly or lacked detail within their pixel artwork (I would disagree, but that's for another time), but there was a certain presence implied in these kinds of foes. There is a fear that is there, either in their looks or what they could do to you within the game. There was a danger that they represented, and they could intimidate on sight. Whether by who they are or how they looked, they applied a pressure to players.

Some might enjoy this pressure, taking it as a measure of their own power. I can cut down ninjas with one swipe in *Ninja Gaiden*. I could clobber Rocksteady with Donatello's bo (from a cowardly position on top of some boxes). It's the kind of thing that makes you feel powerful. It feels good to be stronger than some imagined powerful alien threat, and is debatably one of the draws of the old action game. It feels good to defeat these things.

But, for those who are still learning games, or having trouble with them (like I was), these can be a source of unexpected intimidation. Knowing you can die in one hit from any enemy in *Contra* puts a ton of pressure on the player to perform well and keep themselves alive. This pressure can be so great that it causes some players to play better, while others might find it wears them down and makes them more prone to dying.

I was deeply the latter, finding monsters to be too stressful to deal with. I would often run from them after I took damage, or blindly attack in hopes that I'd kill them before they got me. It was difficult to develop any kind of strategy in this state, instead acting out of blind fear. This came in part from the mechanics of these varied

games, but also from simply being intimidated by the enemies. Even something as simple as a Goomba or Koopa Troopa (with their lanky, creepy snapping turtle faces) was enough to mess with my reaction times and action timing. I'd move too late or panic and move too early. It was always something, even if it was as simple as the direct, determined path of the Goomba. Seeing that trouble marching my way, absurd as it was, put a lot of pressure on me that would often break me.

But you could die in one hit from getting stepped on by a mushroom, so I wouldn't say I was a huge chicken.

Kirby's Dream Land was the first game I'd ever played where the developers seemed to work hard to make their enemies seem unassuming and carefree. Like they didn't have any interest in your presence and were just out wandering around with no set goal in mind. I mean, sure, King Dedede said to clobber the pink puffball, but that's no reason to get all violent with him.

Take the inhabitants of the first stage, Green Greens. The first enemy you run into is Waddle Dee, a puffy creature that seems to be out for a walk with no apparent goal in mind. It's just kind of in the middle of a morning jog, and doesn't seem particularly interested in hurting you. It's just kind of walking and hopping about.

It's a softball-looking critter, even when compared to the grim determination of the Goomba. A Goomba might just be a mushroom with legs, but there is nothing soft about that glare it fixes on you from the moment it walks on-screen. That thing is MAD, and it is going to take it out on you in some way. Even if it walks right past you as you leap over it, it still looks furious, and you just know things won't go well for you if you get in its way. And if you screw up that jump over him like I did the first time I met a Goomba, you were met with death. That walking mushroom demanded respect right out of the gate, and you best believe I respected him.

Waddle Dee doesn't have that same kind of scary look on its face. It has this blank look, as if it's daydreaming the whole time it's out walking. It doesn't look like it's out to get you at all.

Compared to all of the ninjas and robots and monsters I'd run into in every other game, this thing looked cute and innocent. It looked like it wasn't all that interested in stopping your progress at all. Maybe it would bump into you and excuse itself, but it certainly wasn't out to hurt you.

This was quite an effect in an era of rough games that made tough demands of their players. You'd better get yourself together and learn these mechanics, because an outraged mushroom is going to walk right over to you and kill you where you stand. You'd better learn your fighting moves before a long-haired martial artist kicks you until your bones break. You'd better get good with guns before an alien rushes through you and leaves you bleeding and dying.

Death came easily in many early games, and often with huge costs to your progress. This made every enemy feel like a threat, and most of the enemies were designed to visually convey that threat no matter how unthreatening they would normally be. Again, Goombas look pretty rough for something that just walks in a straight line in hopes that it will hit you.

And here comes Waddle Dee, all vacant-eyed with its floaty, meandering walk. It doesn't look like it's out to do more than walk to a friend's house. It was a striking thing to see – this expression of visual innocence in worlds where we know all beings are out to do us harm. If something's walking your way in a video game, it usually means it's out to hurt you. And this is typically conveyed in its visual appearance. Had the Goomba been grinning, would you have leapt out of its way if it was your first experience with a game?

So, seeing this silly creature immediately puts the player at ease, to an extent. It's still a game and you know enemies mean to hurt you, but this one doesn't immediately look like it's out to do you harm. If you just let it bump into you it'll hurt you, sure, but it doesn't look like it will.

This is an important first step in how players perceive *Kirby's Dream Land*, as it is working to disarm the kind of pressure that players like me would feel when seeing an enemy. Whether by trying to make them look tough to intimidate players or to make them screw

up, or so that they look cool so that players feel good in overcoming them, many of these enemies would apply a kind of pressure/tension on the player from their appearance alone.

This is something I'd feel more acutely in horror games years later, but the principles are the same. The enemies are often designed to impart a sense of danger on the player. They should, because the enemy presents a danger of failure to them. Seeing these foes should tell the player that they will cause them harm, which is, honestly, just good design. It tells the player everything they need to know about their foe at a glance, even if they've never touched a game before. Ugly/scary thing means danger, so you need to react to it. Likely with whatever combat skills the game gives you.

This sense of danger creates a pressure to act in the player, as you need to do something to make that tension go away. Defeating the enemy is typically how you'd do that, so the mere appearance of the foe, if it looks scary or intimidating, encourages the player to do something. You need to, or else you'll be harmed in the game or defeated.

Horror games use this to wind the player up tight, often keeping players from dispatching foes quickly or in a straightforward fashion so that they can feel that tension more powerfully. As you may have experienced from playing *P.T.*, *Amnesia*, *Fatal Frame*, *Silent Hill*, or any of the other giants of horror, that fear can grow so strong that it locks you up, or makes it difficult to perform the simplest actions.

Take *P.T.*, for example. For me, Lisa (the ghostly antagonist) was so frightening that I could barely make myself walk through the environments. All you had to do in that game was walk around and solve cryptic puzzles (I know I am extremely oversimplifying it), and yet I was powerless to do anything but stare at the wall and wait for death. That pressure can get so overwhelming that the player ceases to be capable of acting, or will act in irrational ways. Horror games are often designed to push you that hard on purpose.

Now, I'm not exactly playing horror games here with *Super Mario Bros.*, but the effect was similar. That sensation of being dogged by something that could kill me put so much pressure on me that I

couldn't concentrate on aiming my jump or knowing when to jump. I just mashed the button blindly the first few times I tried to get past it, often blundering right into it (and being startled by the game's death jingle).

This principle was common in almost every single game I've ever played at the time. I felt intimidated by the foes I faced, and so my actions were far from calm and well-thought-out. They were typically panicked reactions that sometimes worked, but usually didn't.

Waddle Dee was designed to break that kind of sensation, though. To run counter to that sense of fear and tension that most video game enemies convey.

Waddle Dee does not look tough. It looks like a marshmallow stuffed in a humanoid shell (wait, that sounds kind of scary and weird). It doesn't exude any kind of menace with its movement or actions. It doesn't play into the kind of pressure players would be used to feeling from an enemy's appearance. Instead, it's almost calming and welcoming. I'd probably cuddle one if I could (and thanks to some Kirby plushies, I can!). It's a very different mental reaction than I would expect from an enemy in a video game. Hugs, not attacks.

It doesn't immediately throw up those mental flags that tell you to attack. Nothing about its look or actions tells me that I need to do something about it. So, I found myself able to calm down and actually think about what to do about it. The game gave me a ton of options, too (but more on those later), which I could carefully choose and put to use as I watched Waddle Dee draw near. For once, a game gave me the mental space to consider my options without the visual pressure I normally got from a game enemy drawing near.

Things don't really grow any more menacing as you move through Green Greens, either. The next foe you meet is a baby bird (well, it looks like a baby, but it's as big as you are) called Twizzy. It just kind of flutters up and down. Again, I want to lean over and pet this thing. It's super cute, just like the last creature we ran into. Again, it's not coming your way. It's not even scowling at you. It just looks

like it's working on teaching itself how to fly. Nothing menacing about that at all. That pressure just isn't there from anything it's doing.

After that, we meet Bronto Burt. It's just this mass of squishy substance with wings, flying up and down without a care. It even keeps high enough in the air that you could almost walk under it without even paying any attention to it. Still nothing that means to do you any harm unless you stumble into them at a full run. Which would hurt anyone, honestly. Watch where you're going!

Then, you stumble across a hopping mushroom (Cappy). It's kinda lumpy and weird, but still doesn't have much on that burning stare from a Goomba. Still, if you try to suck it up, you'll come across the first somewhat unsettling creature in the game. Cappy looks a bit... off when you take his mushroom hat off. A little bit like a spooky spirit that's masquerading as a mushroom. It's strange, but even if you're suddenly panicked by this weird creature, you're likely just going to spit his hat right back in his face, blasting him to oblivion. Besides, he's not THAT spooky when surrounded by all of these cheerful creatures.

What else is there in this first area? A few Bronto Burts fly by in the sky, likely soaring over you like birds on the breeze. A grinning Poppy Bros Jr, with its adorable hat and absentminded smile, is out for a walk as well. None of these things seems to be out to get you beyond a single Waddle Dee that's running. Everything else seems like it just exists here and is going about a regular day of woodland frolicking. As long as you don't blunder right into them, they don't really mean you any harm. It's to the point where you'd swear you were the aggressor here and not any of the other creatures.

Which is maybe depressing? Let's not dwell on it.

To reiterate, all of these things look cute, squishy, and fluffy (except for weird ol' Cappy). They look soft, probably even gentle. I feel like I could scoop them up and carry them along with me instead of fighting them, had the game given me the option. They also don't seem too inclined to attack me, and are just out for a walk. They're all a far cry from the persistent, angry enemies of your average game, and rely more on your own clumsiness to take damage.

This is quite a calming lead-in to a game, and it gives *Kirby's Dream Land* this sense of peace and safety right from the start. Yes, you can take damage from blundering into these creatures and they are technically out to get you, but nothing in their looks or behaviors would suggest that. You have to walk into them to find that out, and given that most of them are slowly sauntering around, it lowers the chance of that happening by accident. Even an unskilled new player (which is definitely what I was) could easily make it to the end of this first area without much trouble. And without feeling that they were in trouble, too, eliminating that pressure that can come from having to do well in a world filled with monsters.

That isn't to say that the game never provides you with some sense of resistance. Once you clear that first field of woodland creatures, you come across Poppy Bros Sr, and he doesn't seem too impressed that you thumped his little brother when he was out smelling the flowers on a peaceful hike. The look on his face is still friendly, and he's sporting the same goofy hat as his younger brother, but he'll start throwing huge cartoon bombs at you before long. It's something that could honestly get a bit stressful (except for how your powers can completely wreck this dude, but again, more on that soon). Still, are you all that frightened of a big, silly looking fella in a pom pom hat?

What about the boss of the area? Bosses were always a point when games went all out on intimidation or grossness. When the pressure was supposed to be staggering. When the music was pounding.

Whispy Woods looks more surprised than mad that you're there, and proceeds to fight you by...dropping apples and breathing on you hard. It's not exactly terrifying, and I'm fairly certain the Poppy Bros Sr throwing bombs at you was far more stressful. Even if you panicked and stood too close to Whispy Woods, you'd find yourself pretty much perfectly safe standing right in front of his face. Also, you're fighting a puzzled-looking tree. It's not exactly intimidating stuff, although there's a lot going on during this fight and it might create that sense of pressure. I didn't feel much fear from it as a kid, though, and that's saying something.

Many of the game's enemies have that cute look to them, relaxing the player with their appearances and their slow attack styles.

While their offensive powers will grow over the course of the game, much of its cast is still pretty adorable and doesn't move too quickly, allowing you plenty of time to figure out how to deal with their presence. It takes away that feeling that you need to react quickly, or that you should even be afraid of them based on their appearance to begin with. You're left feeling relaxed, able to tackle the game at your own pace with your choice of timing.

And if you didn't already feel safe around these critters, there was always your incredible powers to make you feel more comfortable.

2.

“Kirby's Dream Land was the first game that I can remember playing at all. I remember I would get to the first mini boss, Poppy Bros Jr. That is the first enemy that you can't just suck up and spit out, but I would still try to do that every time. He would kill me and then I would just try again. I remember I just really liked the song playing in the background. I remember feeling like that battle was just the end of the game. You get to the funny bomb guy, he blows you up, and then you just play again.

Then one day, by some random luck, I sucked in a bomb and spat it back at him. I must have been around 6 years old when I was hit by that epiphany. I discovered that there was more game after that! I finally beat that mini boss and continued through the forest. Then I reached the real first boss, Whispy Woods. And I had no idea what to do again. I thought surely this was the actual end of the game. You couldn't suck up a whole tree. There was nothing I could do but die and play the whole thing again. I remember that I especially liked the music that played during that battle, so I would play over and over again just to hear the tree boss music.

Again, by some random luck, I managed to inhale one of the apples and spit it back at the tree's face. Another epiphany! This time I really figured it out. You could spit any monster's attacks back at them. After this, it was only a matter of time until I could finally put a beat down on ol' King Dedede. This was the first game that I remember beating, too.”

- Angel Polanco, developer of The Void Rains Upon Her Heart (which was heavily inspired by Kirby)

For a soft little marshmallow creature, Kirby was a little powerhouse when he wanted to be. Even if all of these jogging creatures and explosive-loving elves put you on edge, Kirby was well-equipped to deal with them.

Kirby's main means of offense was his vacuum-like suction powers.

He can inhale enemies whole, then spit them back out as a destructive star shot that's more than enough to clobber every enemy outside of bosses (with a few invincible exceptions).

It's a neat power to use, and makes huge strides toward making the game more approachable for less-skilled players.

For starters, the ability removes an enemy from play just from using it. When you inhale, you'll draw in anything that's in your path. That can pull in multiple enemies if they're within your suction range, taking them completely out of the equation. You don't need to shoot someone a few times, punch them until they drop, or land a perfectly-aimed jump. You just have to activate the power in their general direction and they're removed from play.

This ability has a large blast radius on a Game Boy screen, too, giving you an easy means of getting rid of several enemies without even having to aim. It hits a wide area in front of Kirby's mouth, and outside of bosses and certain rare monsters, it will remove most dangers in a split-second. Even something that's about to hit you can be pulled in through this action.

Except Scarfy, but he's a jerk.

Anyway, this takes a lot of emphasis off of the player's reaction time, as you can fire up this ability from long range and completely rid yourself of an enemy. If they're anywhere near the big hit box for this attack, they're gone. Someone with a slower reaction time, or who might miss the timing and positioning for a more targeted weapon, can still easily deal with the enemies of *Kirby's Dream Land* using this handy ability. It removes a lot of the challenges that can come with many other common combat styles of the period, and paved the road for my own successes.

Childhood Joel did not do well at *Castlevania*. In *Castlevania*, the protagonist's attack is a whip strike. This attack has a wind up before it hits, it lashes out in a straight line at the protagonist's shoulder height, and it only strikes a certain distance in front of the protagonist. It's not too unusual a weapon, but using it requires the player take several things into account.

For one thing, you need to be sure you are striking at the correct height. Remember fighting Flea Men? The little jumping dinks? Getting your aim just right was pure misery with them, as you also had to factor in their jumping height. The same challenge would come up to anything airborne, like the Medusa Heads, Bats, or various enemy projectiles. Your aim needed to be quite precise a lot of the time.

You also had to be sure something was at a certain range. You could whip enemies from a decent distance away, but you still had to be relatively close to them compared to games that gave you firearms (although I was no better at *Mega Man 2*, as I came to find out at my buddy's sleepover). These two were fairly common requirements with any game that gave you a melee weapon, forcing you to factor in distance and height if you wanted to land that hit.

What was interesting for *Castlevania* was the timing. Many action games let you lash out with a melee weapon with almost no hesitation, letting you mash attack in a panic and still land hits. *Castlevania* wanted you to know exactly when to strike, having you wind up and attack at the precise moment you'd land the hit. As a horror game, this was a neat design decision, as even your most basic attack was loaded with a moment of tension. Did I attack at the right time? Is my hit going to land before the enemy smacks me? Great stuff.

This all might be second nature to many players, but for me when I started playing games, it was a bit too much to factor in. Like my gym class basketball games, where I'd have to factor in throwing distance, timing, throw strength, aim, and recalling who my opponents/teammates were, and doing all this on a short time limit, I just couldn't process it all fast enough. It was too many things at once.

Then again, so were many games of the time. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the timing down, and couldn't get my shots and strikes aimed up properly. I was prone to panicking when multiple enemies showed up, shutting down and running, or just attacking blindly while hoping for the best. They're not plans that worked very well during the period, so for most games, I only ever got to know the first stage or two. Once the challenge ramped up, my

fearful, blind attacks just wouldn't cut it.

Kirby's suction power was a revelation for me, though, as I could blunder through things and still manage to land those hits. The enemies were often unassuming, too, so that took some pressure off and allowed me to calmly attack. If something got the drop on me, or if the enemy numbers got a little bit too much, though, I could still just slam that attack button and have Kirby devour all of my troubles. I could even just hold the button in anticipation of something walking toward me, waiting for the enemy to just fall into my mouth.

Timing was all but taken out of the equation, allowing me to attack enemies that should have been too close, or just hold onto the attack button until the foe defeated itself. Aiming was gone, too, as the attack had a large blast radius, and I could just put the power to use and wait for something to blunder into me. All of the usual concerns for hitting something in a sidescroller were gone.

This power made huge strides in moving away from the high skill demands that most games had at the time. It didn't worry about whether my timing was good or if I could quickly react to a change in combat. It gave me a powerful tool to dealing with the enemies that came walking my way, and allowed me to tackle the game at whatever pace felt right at the time. It allowed for several different reaction styles that a panicked or unsure player might fall into, and let me dictate more of the pace of the game rather than adapt to what the game required of me.

And again, the sheer power of this ability is important. You didn't have to spit these foes out and then hit them with this ability again. Unlike *Super Mario Bros 2*, where you had to throw an enemy at another foe or damaging object to defeat them, your enemy was beaten the moment you sucked them up. The power was easy to aim, allowed for different timings, and was completely devastating to creatures. It took a ton of pressure off to know how effective this tool was.

Still, if you caught someone in your mouth, the power couldn't be used any more. To complete the suction attack, you'd have to close your mouth and trap the enemy inside. Wouldn't that then force a

moment of vulnerability on the player as they swallowed the thing they're eaten? Or leave them with an uncomfortable mouth filled with forest friends when they needed to fight something else?

The design of having Kirby spit his mouthful back at other enemies seems like genius to me, here. They could have trapped Kirby in some swallowing animation, or they could have had him simply return to normal shape, but instead they gave players another tool to deal with enemies. You could spit your morsels back out if you needed to hit someone else that was coming your way, sending a star-mouthful right into the next foe's face.

"I was wondering if I could make a game with simple controls, where you use the enemies to attack. I was thinking of using an enemy the way you'd use a soccer ball: heading the enemy, kicking the enemy..."(3) Sakurai said of the ability in a 1993 interview for the Japanese *Kirby's Adventure* strategy guide.

This targeted shot required a bit more skill in aiming, as your attack would travel in a straight line out from you. These shots were about the same size as your base character with his mouth empty, though, making for a big attack with a great chance of hitting something. Your aim didn't even have to be that great, although aiming was required a bit more than it would be with your suction attack.

As Sakurai had said, Kirby was designed to be a gateway to games, and you can really see that here with the spitting ability. This power allowed the game to start teaching players some of the nuances of more skilled attacks that would be needed in other games, but did so without forcing them to get good at them quickly. If you weren't comfortable with aiming a shot, you could always just spit your swallowed enemies back out and move right back on to vacuuming up others. You didn't HAVE to use this attack most of the time. You could just avoid it altogether.

The developers often put enemies just close enough together that it encouraged you to try that power, though. Even just to spit the enemy out so you could suction something else up, you'd find yourself spitting your star right into the next enemy. The developers took the time to line up foes in a row for this reason, showing players the power of this handy attack (and preparing them for

when they'd have to use it against bosses). Accidentally killing enemies with this power would show you how it was helpful to learn, gently encouraging you to keep on using it.

Even if you weren't too confident in your ability to spit, the game still didn't push you too hard for some time. It was never much needed in the game's levels, as you could get away with using your suction powers exclusively for pretty much the entire game. Bosses needed you to use it, though. So how did the developers deal with that hurdle? How did they make this power easy to approach?

Starting with Whispy Woods, you didn't exactly have to work too hard to aim it correctly. Whispy Woods covers the entire right-hand side of the screen, so as long as you spit apples in that direction, you're going to score a hit. There's no worry that you're going to shoot and miss, as you just about can't miss the huge creature. You might even feel so inclined to spit the apples in its face, which teaches you how to jump and shoot with little chance of failure. Your hit is always going to land, leaving you to be the judge of whether you nailed the right spot or not. This might unintentionally allow you to practice for a boss much later on, too.

What about Lololo and Lalala, the box-pushing bosses of Castle Lololo (why are these two villains all of a sudden? WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THIS GAME?!)? Well, they're contained within some tight hallways, forcing the player to only shoot straight at them. The only kicker here is that you have to be facing them as they come through those hallways. It's hard to miss so long as you're facing the right way and are in the correct hallway, again showing the player how this power works with little expectation that they do anything tricky. You just have to put yourself in the right place to hit, and then face the correct direction. All minor stuff, but still vital skills for someone learning to play games for the first time.

Kabula, boss of Float Islands, teaches you the importance of aiming, but does it in a way that still keeps players from feeling too stressed. Rather than have you suction up enemies and spit them back, it gives you a leaf that allows you to spit out air blasts as fast as you'd like. You just have to float freely between the monster's shots as you fire back at it.

You're facing off against the blimp with a cannon on it, which is a large target, and you have to line up where you hit. You can be very picky with your shots, waiting until you're lined up just right to puff damaging breaths into it, or you can just kind of spray your shots all over the place. Both methods work just fine, but the latter allows players some more practice in getting their aim down right. You can fiddle with it as much as you like, figuring out heights and how to best aim to hit a moving monster. It's a great final lesson before the game actually expects you to line up your shot.

So, when Kracko the cloud looms above with its sinister eye staring down at you at the end of the fourth stage, you've learned how to aim your shot, how to position yourself to take the shot, and the timing you'd need to land it properly.

All of these bosses steadily teach the player a skill that most games would require right from the beginning of the first stage. Lining up a shot or strike is a vital skill in almost any action game, but *Kirby's Dream Land* throws that out the window with its suction ability. You can Hoover up enemies at various ranges without much need to line up a shot or even time it correctly. This lowers the skill demand for the game considerably, making it much more approachable for someone just learning how to play games. It's a generous striking system.

The developers didn't just make something that was easier, but instead included elements that would help teach players how to aim their attacks in the games they would play down the road. Through its boss progression, and the size of the attack, you're encouraged to steadily work on your aim. You learn how to line up a shot properly, how to make sure you're facing the right way, and how to hit a moving target. This all might sound quite simple for someone reading this book who's put years into playing games, but for someone who finds them daunting or who's just learning, it's a huge deal to be given the space to slowly learn a skill.

Not everyone flourishes under pressure, after all. Not everyone has an innate ability to parse what a game demands of them and then act on it. I was definitely the latter, often finding games just as overwhelming as playing sports.

Again, I loathed basketball in gym class due to this sense of being overwhelmed with things I needed to know and do all at once. You have to dribble the ball, run with it, and innately know who is on your team and what their position is. You've also got various skill levels all working in tandem, with good players often shouting for the ball from all angles the moment you get it. This is because those good players want to win, and they know that you putting your hands on the ball for even a few seconds will wreck that for them. No one is interested in whether you're learning the game (maybe the teacher, but they never helped me one bit), but instead expect you to play it flawlessly and know all of its rules the moment that ball is in your hands.

Oh yeah, and deal with the social pressure that came with failing, as you'd have a handful of people who would be disappointed or even mad at you if you don't hand that ball off just right. And all of that mental pressure would hit me at once, locking my mind up as I struggled to make a call on where to pass the ball. The result was typically a toss in some random direction that would write off the game and the rest of my day.

Games aren't much better, or at least they didn't used to be. You get tutorials and the like nowadays, and even if you don't, the first section of the game is often built to teach you the basics. Old games often tried to do this as well, as anyone who played *Super Mario Bros* can testify that it encourages learning the basics in an environment that is pretty slow-paced. For me, everything was still moving just a little too quickly, though. It was all a bit much in *Mario*, or at least it got that way after a few levels due to the ease in which you could fail. It might have been a slow-paced game early-on, but *Mario* was still quick to drop you to your death constantly.

Getting back to the basketball example, *Kirby's Dream Land* took a great deal of pressure away by making your decision to attack a far simpler one. You didn't really have to aim or factor in timing in as tight a window as most other games of the time, allowing you to discard a few pieces of the decision-making process that goes into game combat. With aiming and timing out the window, you could turn your reaction process into something as simple as hitting the attack button when you saw an enemy. There's no lining up the hit

at all, if you don't want. And with many enemies just sauntering your way at a slower pace, it was super easy to make that call with a comfortable amount of time.

But the game still goes out of its way to offer the ability to learn that timing and aiming at your leisure. You can still use your spitting attack to develop your ability to aim and shoot, and you typically only had to land a single hit to take an enemy down. By allowing you to choose between these two attacks, the game lets you choose when you want to practice doing something a little harder, and rewards you a great deal for getting it right. If you don't feel comfortable, you can ignore using the ability outside of bosses, and even those are typically constrained to spaces where you don't have to do anything complex to hit them.

Whispy Woods just needs you to face the right way. Lololo and Lalala ask you to aim, but force you into lanes so that you just need to choose the right one to hit them. Kabula flies all over the place, but you can spray shots as fast as you like until you learn how to line things up.

Even Kracko, that deeply-unsettling lightning cloud, doesn't demand a great deal of you, even if that thing is where I first really started running into trouble in *Kirby's Dream Land*. It often hovers at the height of Kirby's jump, teaching the player how to fire off a shot while leaping. It's likely the most difficult skill the game looks to teach you, but it does so by keeping the enemy right at the height of your jump for most of the fight. It doesn't sit at an odd height so that you might miss often, but almost always sits at a single height so you can practice getting that shot down.

Although sometimes that rotten cloud fights more aggressively than others. I didn't think I could ever simultaneously be so mad at, and slightly afraid of, a cloud. But here we are. And I still hate it.

You can see the thought line running all through the bosses, steadily teaching the player all of the skills they need to learn the basics of combat for most other games. They're handy abilities to learn throughout the levels, but they're not something the game ever demands you learn outside of boss fights. You can get by with sucking up foes for most of the game without incident, easily

blasting enemies by sucking them up and spitting them out, which arguably requires far less skill than aiming a shot.

And when the game does require you to use your spit attack, it teaches you how to aim it with every successive boss fight. It's entirely possible you'll learn how to effectively do this throughout regular play anyway, but the game is still designed as a steady curve that will eventually leave you with the attack skills that your typical game takes for granted that you know. *Kirby's Dream Land* never expects you to know how to aim and strike from the start, but works instead as a teaching tool so that you're ready to do it by the end of the game.

It's such a lovely thing. *Kirby's Dream Land* not only goes easy on you throughout the game, allowing you to be a bit clumsier than most games of the time, but it also goes out of its way to teach you the skills you'll need to go on to play other games. It teaches you that aiming and timing over the course of play, telling you that it's all right to fail along the way. It helps you hone that shot so that by the time you're at King Dedede's door, you're ready to hit that moving target with the right timing. And that you can possibly take those skills to a whole new game when you're done.

Kirby's Dream Land wasn't just concerned with making games more approachable for a different audience by making things easier. Its wide suction attack, with its endless duration and incredible power, would have allowed that just fine, letting the player savor that victory by overcoming a game that barely fought back. Instead, it set out to show its players, through its slow, calm teachings, how to do those fast, well-aimed attacks all of the other games were asking of them. It wasn't content to just give you a simple game to play. It wanted you to walk away a little better, and a little more confident, so that you could enjoy more games for yourself as well.

If this was still overwhelming for you, *Kirby's Dream Land* still wasn't done putting in work to make the play space more comfortable for players who lacked confidence.

3.

“I have loved video games from the moment I got to play them. I’ve always had an affinity for animation and technology, and video games obviously spoke to that medium intrinsically. I also have always had an appreciation for movement in games, and more specifically, the freedom of movement that flight grants. When E.T. for the Atari 2600 came out, I actually enjoyed it more than the other games out at the time - specifically because ET could fly at any time. It was incredibly rudimentary, but to me, it spoke to the power of video games in that one could live out their fantasy of being able to fly through the medium.

There are few games where characters can run and jump and also fly, and that style of gameplay didn’t come to me again until Kirby’s Dream Land came out. Before then, if a character was able to fly (Mario in particular in his third outing), I would say to my friends “Yeah, but E.T. can just do it. You don’t need to get an item or anything,” and I wondered why nobody made a game like that again. Kirby’s Dream Land came out and reintroduced this element (to me, anyway), and that is the hook that drew me in. I saw a commercial on TV for it and saw how effortlessly he was flying. I didn’t know anything else about it, but that was enough for me to put it on my Christmas list that year, and when I got it, I played it relentlessly.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was the first game I played where I enjoyed the movement so much that I studied it and finessed it. I would take note of the speed at which items came shooting out of his mouth, how he could harm enemies by dive bombing them, how the bomb, when spat out, would destroy hordes of enemies at once(so I tried to line them up), and how the differences in speed were between jumping and flying. The animation and fluidity of Kirby’s motions was so impressive that I would do every move and just watch how the character object moved about. It was so dynamic and beautiful that I really felt like video games had just evolved.”

– Daniel Williams, ActiveUp Games

Flight. If Kirby's suction ability wasn't cutting it for you, you could always soar over everyone as you played *Kirby's Dream Land*.

For someone who was completely daunted by everything in games, this was a vital element that helped me feel much better when enemies were all around me.

It was a power that was designed right alongside Kirby's suction ability, according to Satoru Iwata. "We came up with a lot of ideas, and the one that stuck was "flying." How would Kirby fly? By puffing up like a balloon! How would he do that? By inhaling the air. Wouldn't it be fun then, if he could inhale enemies at the same time? ...that was the basic thought process." (4)

Kirby can puff himself full of air and fly pretty much whenever the player likes. All you have to do is press Up and you're in business, flapping your little arms to float through the air. It could be a little unwieldy to do, given that you had to keep pumping those arms to stay in the air, but if you were nervous, you could just fly over anything that was worrying you. Even if you couldn't really gauge the timing for keeping yourself at a certain height, all you had to do was hammer the button until you were at the top of the screen and you were typically safe.

And if something came flying your way, you weren't defenseless, either. You could exhale a puff of air any time you liked, with this damaging breath slamming most enemies. You could then tap that Up button again without even losing height, continuing your peaceful flight through the skies.

This was quite the safety net for when the game got hectic. *Kirby's Dream Land* wasn't always a peaceful jaunt, and it often wasn't long before it would send some eerie, weird foes your way, or task you with some more challenging areas filled with spikes or creatures that would react poorly to your suction abilities. Let's just say that I have some very unpleasant memories of Angry Scarfy, the cyclopean pig thing that gets all up in your face if you dare to try to breathe it in.

For someone learning the game, even Kirby's slighter demands could be something that became overwhelming. More than once, I

just found the screens a bit too busy, and would feel that sense of being overwhelmed setting in.

Instead of being stuck with having to deal with it, I could just hop up and fly away, though. Even if there was a ceiling or something that would keep me relatively low, I could typically gain enough air that I could get away from whatever danger was too much for me.

Funny enough, it's something that delighted me as I soared above Green Greens, but it was something I didn't use all that often after that. It's an almost-trivial power due to the striking range of the suction ability, and the fact that most stages won't just let you fly up there without being attacked. I never much felt like I HAD to use it many instances, but rather just enjoyed the ability to fly whenever I liked.

The flight power always hung in the back of my mind to calm me as I played, though. It wasn't always a power I felt I NEEDED to use, but having the option always available was comforting. It let me know that I could always just take off out of a fight if things got a little too troubling. I didn't have to just sit there and mentally fight my way through it.

It's not always about needing to use a tool. Sometimes, it's just about having the option to use it that makes a difference. It takes a certain mental weight off of you to have it, allowing you to feel comfortable knowing that you can withdraw at any time. You don't have to endure things if the game gets too overwhelming. You don't have to sit there and take it.

That's a kind of pressure I felt in many games as well. That whole focus on using the tools you have within the moment can become overwhelming when there's no way around it. Again, that Goomba's approach will steadily force you to act in some way. You'll either jump over it, on it, or right in front of it. You might walk or run straight into it. You'll be pushed to use your tools, all of which have some potential for failure in choosing the wrong one or implementing it in the wrong way.

You could argue that this is just the nature of video games, but giving a differently-skilled player options of various degrees can

help them feel more comfortable within the game. For me, that meant giving me the option to fly over any obstacle that happened to be bothering or overwhelming me. I had an escape hatch if none of the other choices seemed good, or if I suddenly didn't feel comfortable making a decision on which to use, or that I didn't have time to consider which to use. It allowed me to choose a safe option that worked pretty close to 100% of the time when I needed it. I could always choose flight if I was met with choice paralysis.

And like I said, I didn't often feel like I needed it, but knowing it was there as a final solution helped me make my decisions more calmly and carefully. I didn't have to worry about failing in the use of one of my abilities, as I could always just retreat if I chose the wrong one or didn't feel I could do the right thing. Being locked into an array of combat options that could all have dangerous consequences for my playthrough was often enough to make me run or lock up, but having one truly safe option took a ton of that pressure away, allowing me to more carefully make the right combat decisions.

And I was making those right decisions, too. I was taking the time to learn when to inhale, lowering my time spent sucking up air and learning just how close I could get to my enemies before using it. I was learning how to aim Kirby's spitting shot afterwards. I was able to do all of this because I didn't feel that pressure to perform perfectly. I was able to abandon both of those abilities whenever I needed it. I didn't HAVE to get them right. I WANTED to get them right.

This distinction made me much more comfortable with the game and its demands, giving me a feeling of choice that lowered the pressure I felt from the demands of combat. I was given some breathing room to learn, as I don't tend to do well when forced to react quickly. Like I brought up in the basketball example, it was all just too much to bear due to there being so many wrong answers I could choose. I couldn't just float out of the situation to escape it and still progress the game, so I could never get comfortable enough to learn the game at my own pace. Too many factors were demanding I have certain skills at that exact moment. I was not given the room to build or to make the decision at my own pace,

and so I'd lock up.

The flight ability gives players that room to decide what they want to do for themselves, and therefore gives them a break from the more demanding aspects of video game combat. It lets them take a minute to breathe if they need it, and allows them some more relaxed thought in knowing they could extract themselves from combat if need be.

I'm sure some players use it to just float through the game, ignoring combat as much as possible. Maybe you'd argue that doing so goes against the spirit of playing games, but I'd also say that we all have our own ways of experiencing and travelling through these digital worlds. I don't fight enemies in the exact same way as someone else does. I don't choose which foes to dodge, or which ones to vacuum up, in the exact way another player would. We all make those split-second decisions differently, based on many different calculations and decisions going on in our minds at the time. We all travel these roads in our own ways, using the parameters of the game to eke out our own adventures within them.

So, what do you or I care if someone flies through *Kirby's Dream Land*? How is our own playthrough of the game affected by someone else's choice of how to experience it? Even if they choose to play with mods in some way, altering the code to find their own unique path through the developer's creation, is our own experience of the game any less? Are we not still free to create challenges or remove them in our own way?

I love *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. I used to play it so obsessively that I started finding new ways to make it harder on myself by leaving out unnecessary items like the defensive clothing and Heart Containers. I wanted to see just how weak I could be and still finish the game. Did you know that Ganon only takes damage from a charged-up base Master Sword? That was a fun surprise in the final battle.

For whatever reason, making a game harder is viewed as more respectable than finding ways to make it easier. Actually, in a world of speed runs and glitches, is that statement even true? For whatever reason, finding a means to shorten the game and make it

easier for a speed run, or in playing games with more challenging requirements (*Dark Souls 3* played on bananas comes to mind) are viewed as viable ways to play a game, yet many will scoff at someone who is making things easier for their own enjoyment. Like what they're doing is lessening the game in some way, or that they're supposed to experience games in a specific way.

It's an argument that's full of holes. Do you honestly care that you're not playing a game to the developer's specific vision if you're playing it with bananas that are built to function like controllers? Or playing *Dark Souls* with a steering wheel, guitar controller, or drums? That you've flipped the world upside-down, or that a player has pushed through a wall to finish *Ocarina of Time* that much more quickly? Are these acts an assault on a game's purity as they're not designed around playing the game in its initial imaginings?

Or is the art of the game a fluid thing, enriched by those who experience it in their own unique ways? Is the beauty of games not in the interactions we bring to them – that the power of games lies in that unique connection each player can bring to them. Games are a medium of interaction – a connection between developer and player that creates something that does not exist alone. All art features this wonderful bond, but games push it to the forefront. It's in our ties with the game and their creators that we make something fun and striking together, sharing in a journey to tell our stories and interact with their worlds.

Yet I know of many people who would look down on someone playing *Kirby's Dream Land* by flying through the game world. That they would do so because the player is not experiencing the world in "the right way." But what is that right way? Why would someone have to throw themselves into combat so that they were playing the game correctly? The developers put in that flight power so that players could use it, right? So perhaps not flying out of danger is the incorrect path, and the developers wished for a more pacifistic approach.

And even if they did wish for you to spend more time in combat, are the developers the be-all-end-all to what a game can mean? Their vision is important, yes, but it's in that connection you bring that the cycle is completed. Developers might have suggestions as to

how you can go through their worlds, but you complete that bond in how you use the tools they give you (or your own ingenuity) to find your place in these digital worlds. It's up to you to find how you're fulfilled in the world of games.

It's also up to you to let go when someone else chooses how they want to experience a game world. Your way is not what someone else might choose, and that is fine. We're all out on our own journeys as we explore a game's world, and everyone may find a different path through a game. Not everyone is looking to be challenged, or to be brutalized by a high difficulty. Some just want to feel strong. Some just want to see striking places. Some want to see how they can break the world into pieces, blasting through design to see what this code will do when pushed to its limit.

They're all viable. They're all enjoyable in personal ways. They all have something to offer. They're all beautiful and wonderful in their own ways.

It's in making a game easier because you need it to be that I often see scorn. The kind of derision that comes from someone needing the assist mode in *Super Mario Odyssey*, or even just wanting to use it. Or from flying over a level because you can't deal with it in *Kirby's Dream Land*. It's this implication that you're playing it wrong because you aren't playing it in some difficult way. Games are hard, and that's what they're meant to be. And if you don't like it, go read a book.

This is the exact kind of attitude that was prevalent at the time of early video games and arcade. It's why games like *Contra* and *Castlevania* are absolutely barbaric in their end game (although I don't see quite so many people complaining when someone uses the extra lives code in *Contra*...). Games are hard, and you should be hard to enjoy them. Only those who embrace challenge belong here.

It's the exact same attitude I'd see in sports or any other activity I felt even a passing interest in growing up. You need to savor that adversity, and no one should make it any easier for you along the way. How will you learn if people go easy on you? How will you ever figure out the game if we don't go at you at full strength?

I guess these people often whip a basketball at toddlers as hard as they can.

Not everyone plays games for the same reason you do. Not everyone is out to win. Victory can be secondary to enjoying a game played at a relaxed, friendly pace. Enjoyment can be found in savoring the playing field or some time with friends doing a shared, loved activity. Most of us aren't shooting to become professional athletes or top-tier players, after all. Most of us are just goofing off with something we enjoy after work or school. So why police it? Why give people a hard time because they aren't seeking out the highest difficulty levels? Why shame someone for how they play? Besides, how does another person's experience playing a game alter yours?

I love the ability to fly in *Kirby's Dream Land*. It's spitting right in the face of those who tell you that you need to enjoy ruthless challenge to play games. It's a giant middle finger to those who say a game has to be hard to be good, or to deserve respect within game development. It's a carefully crafted tool meant to help people gain that foothold to confidence within gaming.

And it's a step toward those harder games. I play *Dark Souls* these days. I've beaten *Ninja Gaiden 2* and *Super C*. Completed *Resident Evil 4* on its highest difficulty level. I can go toe to toe with a challenging game and come out on top. But I needed a little help when I started playing games, and that simple ability to take flight when I wanted gave me that first foothold to finding my confidence with games. It let me get that first step in, and allowed me to feel like I could breathe when the challenge of games was drowning me.

I owe this game such a huge debt, and this single mechanic, whatever you might think about it, helped me get to where I am now. It was that helping hand, extended out of the thought that games could be more approachable, that helped me get here and allowed me to love this medium as much as I do.

4.

“Like most kids in the 90s, a lot of the video games I discovered usually came from hearing about or seeing them played by others in my school. Kirby’s Dream Land was one of those games I crossed paths with much later after it first came out on the Game Boy, mostly because us kids didn’t always get new games on their initial release back then. I vividly remember being at the lunch table in middle school one afternoon, looming around others who brought their Game Boy or Tiger Electronic handhelds from home. Those of us who became friends would play together and exchange games occasionally during recess, sometimes even letting someone play them for the entire lunch period. That’s how we got exposed to other games we didn’t have or games that our parents just wouldn’t buy for us, whether because of the lack of extra money or parental need to discipline us.

Kirby’s Dream Land was something that always popped up because a friend of mine would bring it with him to the lunch table. I remember first playing it on their Game Boy and being both confused and intrigued by it. This was a game that played like Super Mario Land (another game I first played in similar fashion) and had very good music that was catchy. But Kirby looked like a little puffball with a face, or rather a cuddly pillow with legs that would eat up and spit out enemies that looked just as cute and innocent as he was. It was weird, but not in a bad way.

I never looked at Kirby as anything but cute and cuddly when playing his game. There was always those few traits in our game characters that stuck with us as kids. Kirby was the cuddly puff ball that ate everything in front of him, and that’s why I kept playing whenever my friend brought the game with him to lunch. It was different than what I was playing on the SEGA Genesis or saw from my friends who owned a Super Nintendo at home. That made things even more fun and interesting over the years, up to when I played Kirby’s Dream Land 2 on Game Boy, and eventually saw Kirby make it into Super Smash Bros. on the Nintendo 64. Things may have changed a whole lot since then, but Kirby will always be my favorite cute and cuddly pink puff ball.”

– Jakejames Lugo, Journalist & Content Creator

The broad range of the suction ability and the freeing power of the flight ability both made *Kirby's Dream Land* a whole lot easier for me, but another key element was health. Kirby's a rugged little dude, able to take six big hits before his game is done.

If you've come back to play this game with a decent amount of skill and confidence at gaming, you might find it a challenge to take those six hits unless you're being super careless. It can feel excessive at times, like the game is coddling you a bit too much.

But for childhood me, who was nervous and had a hard time with games? It was perfect.

Six hits is quite generous when you can fly and use an attack that instantly defeats foes in a large radius, which is an important way to let beginning players get a feel for things. It was also what tied the other two elements together in making the game more approachable for differently-skilled players. Being able to fly or attack a large radius doesn't mean much if you die in a hit or two, though, as it's still pretty easy to miss something and get thumped out of nowhere.

This health allowed for freedom to make mistakes, again in a medium at a time when that wasn't much allowed. *Castlevania* will take you down in a few hits in its later stages, and often in places where you can take all of those hits with a few careless moves (if they don't outright toss you off a cliff). *Contra* will put you in the ground after a single shot, and only a few deaths will mean a game over.

Kirby was more interested in giving you some breathing room to make mistakes, allowing you to make many of them as you worked your way through its stages. You could screw up a jump, your timing, or blunder right into a few foes and still be able to work your way through the stage. Like the flight ability and suction powers, it was all about giving players that breathing room that would calm them and allow them to finish a level.

There was still some demand of skill. If you wandered into everything in your path, there was a good chance you'd die. *Kirby's Dream Land* was relatively generous with its checkpoints, with levels being broken up into chunks where you'd only be sent back a little ways, but you still had to make some attempt to get out of the way. And even if it did throw that necessity for skill out the window, what would be the harm? You're still free to avoid hits so that you can beat your own personal records (which would make Rampage a whole lot more interesting).

You would later see that in *Kirby's Epic Yarn*. You couldn't actually completely die in that game, although taking a hit would see you losing all of the beautiful, colorful beads you'd collected during the level. Fun Fact: the loudest I have ever screamed at a game in years was at *Kirby's Epic Yarn* when I kept getting hit and losing my beads in one level. You CAN find ultimate challenge in an 'easy' game if you create difficulty for yourself.

Kirby's Dream Land does want to push that challenge level a bit, as, much like its work in the vacuum/spit mechanic (that sounds nastier every time I type it), the game is teaching you some of the fundamentals of playing video games. It wants you to learn how to use your abilities to avoid taking hits, but it's doing so with some generosity in how many hits you can take. There's room to fail multiple times before the game punishes you harshly, which is a far cry from how quickly you could find yourself at a Game Over screen in most titles at the time.

Which was a wonderful touch. Being able to take all of these hits, fly over danger, and use a power that could easily sweep up enemies made for a game that didn't want to push its players too hard, allowing them to find their way through the game at their own pace. There's no timer, and the challenges are relatively slight. Things do get difficult by the game's end (as I would personally find out in a hurry), but it still left room for players of different skill levels. You didn't have to immediately be an ace at games in order to even cross the first stage.

Most might take that for granted. I'm sure there are many players these days who had no trouble cruising through their first games, with a controller feeling immediately familiar in your palm. Some

folks just naturally take to these things. I had to be trained in order to learn to play games. I had to slowly work through the titles I played, often dying constantly and dragging other players down. I'd finish a level or two, and that would be it.

When 3D shooters came to consoles, requiring I learn how to move my character with two control sticks, it took weeks to learn that skill. When *Mario* made the leap to 3D, I felt like I had to completely relearn how to play a platformer, as jumping in 3D space was WILD.

These games often threw me into live challenges that, while simple compared to what their late-game stages would demand, were still far too demanding for me, slowing my progress. It was only because I was older and far more stubborn, having built that baseline of skill in playing games over the years (thanks in no small part to an infusion of confidence from *Kirby's Dream Land*). Had I picked these up in my younger years, I likely would have finally given up games for good.

I'm not saying all games need to go easy on players. I understand the appeal of challenge. What I am saying is that there are players of varied skill levels out there who are dying to get into games, but are held back by the demands of these games. I was one of them, lacking the skills, timing, and confidence I would need to even begin to tackle the games of the era. It was just beyond me at the time, and I'd argue that most of the stuff I played back then was pretty straightforward in terms of controls. Not in terms of the demands of what you could do with those controls, but guiding yourself through them only required a handful of inputs. At least I wasn't also juggling complex inputs as well. I'd have never made it.

I'm saying that there are a ton of people who want to love games who can use something like *Kirby's Dream Land* to build those skills and confidence. There's even more who can draw from these more 'relaxed' challenges to find a foothold in gaming so that they can enjoy it just like everyone else. Assist Modes and easier difficulty levels can offer someone the extra time they need to make those jumps or pull off that boss fight.

As I said earlier, what is challenging to one person might seem easy

to another. I don't exactly feel challenged by *Kirby's Dream Land* these days, but it was a ruthless challenge to me despite the wide attack range, flight ability, and large health pool back when I was a kid. I was not possessed of a certain skill level that would make it feel easy at the time. It was HARD - like, *Dark Souls* hard - for little Joel.

I feel like this is often poorly understood by players who turn up their noses at 'easy' games. That these games are somehow easy for everyone, and that the people who play them don't want to be challenged. For starters, being challenged isn't necessarily what everyone comes to games for, but I already said that. Secondly, and most importantly, your easy game can be someone else's crushing challenge. Based on their skill level or personal abilities, these games can still be hard in a pleasant way, pushing them to a comfortable limit where they have a chance to build the tools to overcome.

That six hit window can mean the difference between someone being able to play games or not. Allowing them the freedom to make mistakes because they may not have the same reaction timing as another player allows more people to play. The openness to make mistakes, rather than the demand for pixel-perfect precision, lets people find joy in the game at their own pace and with their own abilities. They don't have to feel like the game is always going to be impossible for them, and this can allow them to build the confidence to try harder things, or to build those base skills within their own comfort zones for their bodies and reflexes. It lets players experiment and train themselves in their own ways, and find what they want from games as a medium.

And if you DID find *Kirby's Dream Land* too easy and want to gripe about it, you can feel free to try out the Extra Mode and see how well you do when the denizens of Dream Land are out for your blood. If you think this cute world is for little baby players, go ahead and try that out. See how you like getting steamrolled by a confused tree dropping spiked balls on your head. Then come at me.

These features were all greatly important in helping me find my place in games. They helped me build the skills I would need to

play and enjoy harder games by allowing me to play at my own pace and learn within a comfortable environment. I was allowed the time to fail, the time to be scared and flee, and the time to choose when to stand my ground.

These design ideas show a mindset built around inclusion – that players of different skill level and personal ability are welcome in gaming. The brick wall of difficulty no longer has a sign on it telling you that you're not welcome here if you don't relish games for their ruthless difficulty. It's a game telling you that games can be a journey of fun and exploration, and that, even if you aren't a hardcore die-hard fan of being beaten up, you can still find fun here. That you can still enjoy games even if you aren't 'good at them' in a conventional sense. That it's viable for you to enjoy a soothing flight over a field of cute creatures, or that you can just eat your way through a world that doesn't seem interested in fighting you.

There's a quirkiness at work here, a hint of things to come in the gaming industry. A shining light of hope that games might be something I could play and like, even if I never got especially good at them.

But I was starting to get better, even if I didn't know it yet.

5.

“As a child coming to the Game Boy from the NES, I distinctly remember the first Super Mario Land entry as a compromise. The sprites were both smaller and less animated on the monochrome screen, and the music was unmemorable (or borrowed from pre-existing sources, as was often the case with early games). By comparison, Kirby’s Dream Land had larger sprites that read well on the Game Boy display, and some personality to boot! Kirby’s face as he held something in his mouth, Whispy’s tears upon defeat, and many other small such details made Kirby’s world feel more inhabited than Sarasaland, and indeed, the Mushroom Kingdom.

It’s very rare for any developer to get so much right on the first go around. The characters, the core gameplay mechanic, the (stellar, even on Game Boy) musical themes – everything is there. Compare SM1 to SML2 and it’s clearly two engines, two design docs. Kirby’s Dream Land was bottled lightning for the Game Boy - it’s no wonder that both Kirby’s Adventure and Kirby’s Super Star contain remixes of the Game Boy original.”

– Dr. Ryan Thompson, Ph. D in Musicology, Game Audio and Broadcasting at Michigan State University

Mechanically, we can see that *Kirby’s Dream Land* wanted to allow room for its players to make mistakes and feel safe in doing so. But the game does so much more to make the player feel welcome, calm, and (relatively) safe.

Place goes a long way in giving *Kirby’s Dream Land* a sense of relative safety in games. It’s not set in futuristic slums filled with thugs, nor a dark wood filled with soldiers and artillery behind every bush. The game begins in Green Greens, a lush forest filled with peaceful-looking creatures. Huge, puffy clouds float by in the background. Bushes and flowers line your path. Had it been in color, it would have been awash in greens and blues, calling up the

sense of a morning walk. You can almost hear the birdsong on the breeze.

All of the round edges indicate a softness to the place. It's all puffy clouds and lush grass. The place is alive and vibrant. It feels like a well-trodden paradise – the kind of place you'd bring your family to during Summer vacation. It's welcoming and soothing. In many modern exploration games, it's the kind of place you could lose yourself in for a few hours, finding bits of story in lost notes or discovering the secrets of the wildlife who live there.

For instance, did you know that the cute cap-bearing fellows make their own explosives somewhere in this verdant valley?

It's an action game, sure, but this opening place, rather than setting a tone where the player should feel like some rough and tough hero out to reclaim the streets, aims for a sensation of peace. You're out to save your friends, but maybe the troublemakers aren't here at the moment. These cute fellas toddling through the bushes don't exactly seem out to cause trouble, do they?

Even if you don't hit a button, you get a feel for this from looking around. The color might not be present on the Game Boy's screen (which can loan it an interesting, alien quality that's pretty intriguing for a visit to another digital world), but you can see those soft edges and those hints of grass and bushes. You can sense the texture in the pixel work. This isn't a hard place, but a soft one.

That tactile implication allows the guard to relax a bit. You're not going to be beset by villains in this kind of place. You don't instantly get that sense of danger and action that most games set up with their initial levels. *Ninja Gaiden*'s deadly streets are all concrete and hard surfaces. *Contra*'s forest is filled with strange mechanical installations that imply a force is settling into the world and perverting it. Green Greens just looks like a nice place, and it's such a far cry from many of the games of the time. Even *Mario* was filled with bricks, pipes, and steel, again calling up that strange hardness.

Not that *Kirby's Dream Land* never goes to those kinds of hard places, but it chooses not to start there. This is a game that wants

you to feel a bit of safety and familiarity in its green fields, allowing you a moment of comfort as you settle into things. There is danger in the world, but it doesn't want to shout that fact at you from the beginning. This is a safe place to learn what you're capable of.

Which is why Castle Lololo seems like a puzzling second area to go to. I don't know if it's because it's a video game and you just have castles in games or what, but the second stage moves into those hard surfaces that I just talked about. It's all stone walls, cliffs, and spiky bad guys.

While I can see the throughline of most of the developers' decisions about the game, Castle Lololo is always a sticking point for me. Not because it's viciously difficult or anything, but just because a menacing place like a castle doesn't seem to fit in with the rest of the game. I'm assuming the developers wanted to make you feel a little influx of confidence in taking your newfound abilities from a calm forest setting to a more frightening castle setting. That or they were really excited about Lololo and Lalala turning into villains out of nowhere. I still don't understand this decision at all **THEY ARE PUZZLE SOLVING HEROES YOU MONSTERS.**

Not that I'm saying players are afraid of castles. But you have to admit that they're just a bit more stressful than a green field.

Float Islands, the third stage, takes you to a sun-kissed tropical paradise, one where you can lounge beneath the palm trees. Just watch out for falling coconuts. Did you also know that the locals here like to create explosives and store them in palm trees? Aren't video game travel guides filled with wonderful things?

Float Islands are also a lovely space, even if you are dodging falling explosive coconuts here and there. The stars floating through the sea waters are a nice touch, creating something that must look magical at nightfall. Even the spiky cave, when couched within this islands setting, feels like the sort of vacation adventure you'd go on with a few friends. Maybe do a little amateur spelunking in a local cave system just to see some neat rock formations. The cave area has a menace to it, but with the sunny beaches behind you, it feels like the kind of danger you can leave behind at will, returning to your week-long trip.

Ditto for the boat. Although the canons add an element of trouble, don't they?

Maybe my thesis is crumbling a bit?

Bubbly Clouds is perhaps the most relaxing place I've ever seen in a game. It's just wall to wall pillowy marshmallow comfort – a land made entirely of soft, soft clouds. It's this expanse of comfort and rest that makes me want to let poor Kirby enjoy some down time. He's been working pretty hard to bring peace back to Dream Land, and here seems like a decent place to have a break.

There's these odd fortresses that are floating in the skies among these clouds, though, again showing this bounce between safety and danger that the game loves to do. We see it between the first and second stages, and then within the stages themselves for the third and fourth. There's this shift between softness and safety, but still with elements of danger, and then hardness and purposeful construct. You can see the fortresses and structures that the enemy has chosen to build, and these are loaded with much more trouble than the natural settings.

Perhaps I have my own biases that are telling me that clouds and nature are good/buildings and concrete are bad. But I get a strong sense that this world's natural condition is one of peace and calm – of soothing places that these puffy Dream Landers can enjoy, and that the invading forces of King Dedede have encroached on them with these structures filled with monsters, spikes, and hazards.

These places seem to do several things. Like I mentioned with Green Greens, the natural world seems to exist in abundance to bring the player to the places of their own childhood wanderings. Those warm parks and sunny Summer vacation spots have all been captured throughout Dream Land, bringing the player to a source of peace (depending on how much arguing you had to deal with on your family trips, I guess). They're interspersed with these more dangerous, conventionally 'video game'-y locales that contain dangers for the player to overcome. They seem to bounce back and forth between the two.

That back-and-forth may come from the same ideas upon which the

rest of the game is built. It's in providing a less-stressful experience for players, but doing so in such a way that they learn the feel of video games in general. You learn to aim attacks, but you do so in such a way that you can take some of the pressure of landing those hits off since you can miss and still have viable combat options. You learn a video game skill, but in an environment with less pressure.

Here, you're exploring more menacing places, but with some knowledge that safer places are in front or behind you. You're in a spiky cave one moment, then back out on a boat on the seas the next. You get a taste of that danger, but you know you can be free of it, to some extent. Or, you've given a calming place to get your bearings in an area before things grow steadily more intense.

You get a whole stage of freedom to start, then the menace creeps in. After that, it all starts to blend in the same stages until you hit Mt. Dedede, where things are almost entirely tense (with a Boss Rush, even!). It's that ebb and flow of danger that's designed to carefully wade players into dangerous places, the danger gradually growing throughout the stage. It's a sharp effect that I didn't notice when I was first playing the games. At least, not overtly. I definitely felt that something about *Kirby's* locales didn't carry that same hint of menace that would put me on edge before I had even started to play.

Take something like the sewers in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. There's all this grime and discoloration. It feels as if it's oozing with toxic waste and chemical sludge. The foes look misshapen and twisted, their colors grim and strange for living beings. It all feels slightly poisonous, and whether I noticed it directly or not, I definitely felt unsafe in those places, adding a bit more pressure to fight through them.

Kirby went out of its way to erode that pressure using its stage visuals, and would slowly turn up the danger within them. It would gradually take you through that feeling rather than thrusting you into it, allowing you some time to grow more confident in your abilities, or to feel that safety was only a short distance behind you. These places just felt less dangerous due to their referencing of peaceful places and things from the real world. They weren't just whole worlds of danger, but rather real places that contained

pockets of trouble.

And again, this back and forth helps players learn their abilities and accept the more dangerous places that games will take them to. There's a bit more pressure when you face gloomy place after gloomy place. Here, that pressure only mounts sometimes, which teaches players that they can endure it, and allows them to only experience those feelings in short bursts so that they don't become overwhelming.

Not that I'm saying that I was afraid of castles or the sewers. But those awful places did add just a hint more pressure to a child who tended to hover right at the breaking point of giving up while playing games. I didn't have the natural talent or reflexes to make myself feel like I could handle these places. I was someone often floundering to survive, and every little thing about them that was designed to make me feel like a tough action hero often just left me feeling more pressured to fail.

I'm sure some people thought it was pretty cool when the giant happy tree in *Monster Party* shifted into this grim, broken version of its former self, and the grinning blocks that covered the stage turned into bleeding skulls. Bleeding skulls are just naturally cool, and cool heroes only become cooler when fighting on them. That junk gave me nightmares, though, and made it just about impossible for me to play. I'd get a kick out of it years later, but I had to build up that confidence by finding safer places and games to play to build that confidence.

Kirby's Dream Land used locations to help create that self-belief, allowing me some peaceful escapes before I had to delve into danger. It let me wade in and out of trouble, rather than trap me within it, allowing me to build up my confidence and tell myself that my abilities were no less powerful when I was someplace a little scarier. Like the flight ability, I knew that I could get away from danger. I felt safer in Dream Land, and that helped me find the footing I needed to start fighting back against its dangers.

What else made me feel a little safer, there? Our squishy hero certainly helped.

6.

*“It’s really hard to say anything about Kirby without just flatly saying ‘He’s so cute,’ because...he is. Round (for me, at least) is an extremely pleasing shape, and Kirby is nothing but. He’s all round and soft-looking, with a friendly expression (cute even when angry) and little nubby ‘arms’ and goofy shoes. His design is friendly, approachable, and appealing, and not what you would classically think of when someone says ‘bada** defender hero.’ And yet, here we are.”*

– Zillabean, UI/UX Designer and Artist

Look at Kirby. Just look at that puffy little thing. He’s such a cute creature that I refuse to let anyone hurt him. And if you try, I’ll eat you whole.

He’s simple and appealing. Which was a purposeful move, according to Iwata. “When someone really loves a character, they like to sketch them in their notebooks, right? That’s why we gave Kirby a simple circular design, so anyone could draw him.” (5)

And, as it turned out, many people did start to draw this cheerful hero. “After we released *Kirby’s Dream Land*, I remember occasionally seeing chalk drawings and graffiti people had drawn of Kirby, in parks and open spaces. I hope that happens again with *Kirby’s Adventure!*” (6) says Sakurai.

Kirby’s simple design made him easy to remember and recreate, and his cuteness did give him a powerful appeal, but there was something more to it.

Kirby is quite the disarming hero. Instead of facing down danger with a cool head, sword in hand, you open the game with him floating by on a star. Walking around and doing pirouettes in the air, or rolling along on the ground. When you start the game, he gets chased down by butterflies, tumbling along the ground as they

flit around just behind him. He's bumbling and cheerful, a far cry from the grim-faced protagonists of just about every other game.

Kirby brings a whole other mindset to game heroism with his cute appearance and end-of-stage dance numbers. He feels so utterly cheerful when placed alongside the heroes of his time. He's exuberant and positive. His every move is bouncy and happy, from his overgrown form when flying or eating to his tumbling jumps and squishing moves in his dances. That he dances AT ALL says a lot about him. Would you ever expect Simon Belmont to dance when he picked up those weird orb thingies at the end of a stage in *Castlevania*? Because now I want to see that.

His attitude alone helped me feel more at home with him. Games, with their serious plots and serious protagonists, were serious business and you should only play them if you intend to practice, get good, and beat them because you were a serious player. They're not for screwing around on an idle afternoon with a silly buddy, no sir. Games always felt like serious challenges that needed to be overcome, and with the amount of practice and training that would go into learning the nuances of hard stages and challenging games, they could feel more like a job than a lighthearted hobby.

Here, I could feel those elements of gym class sports settling in again. You need to practice. You need to be good because you need to win. Why are you even here if you don't want to win? It's that same old pressure that comes to someone who just wants to play to have fun, but finds himself in a world where games and sports are serious stuff and if you aren't playing to win then you should GO HOME AND STOP BOTHERING EVERYONE.

No one said this in sports, but I could feel the dirty looks. I remembered getting picked last on teams. I remember feeling unwanted. All of that made me want to walk away altogether, rather than practice and grow. Because how was I supposed to practice if no one had any interest in finding a way I could learn amongst all the hyper-competitive people looking to win?

Participation trophies get a bad rap, and trust me, as the proud owner of several, I know. There's an attitude that these devalue victory somehow, but for those of us who will never see first place,

they're something to celebrate. While the hyper-competitive folks might get heated about them, for kids like me who didn't win much, they stood as a celebration for trying to play at all. They make a statement that there is value and growth in simply trying, which childhood Joel could definitely feel. I'd never get that taste of victory, but at least there was something I could tangibly hold that told me that I'd done something significant. Even if I couldn't quite pinpoint what that thing was.

They're a way to tell those kids who don't typically win that they accomplished something to cheer about. Something to dance over, even if they hadn't gotten that first place trophy.

Kirby was different from many heroes of the time. Kirby didn't seem to care all that much if you won or lost. Not that he looked impressed as he was spinning off-screen from losing all of his health, but there was this cheer in simply moving around and playing with him. He looked like he was just happy chumming around with you, no matter how good you were at playing his game. He wanted to save Dream Land, but if we didn't manage to save the day today, there'd still be tomorrow.

There was often a darkness in games and their protagonists. A grim outlook as you took on the role of an antihero fighting crimes, or a stone-faced ninja cleaving through a human being so hard they burst. Not that eating someone alive and digesting them into a star-shaped lump of matter isn't dark, I guess.

Still, Kirby just seems so HAPPY when he's doing things. A ton of work has gone into making sure he looks cheerful and seems exuberant in his appearance. Again, his dancing, the playful level placards, and the general silliness of his actions in the game remove some of that pressure to excel that often comes in games.

It feels weird to say it, but it's not always empowering to take on the role of some powerful fighting machine or musclebound hero. Sure, for many, taking on the role of *Contra's* shirtless heroes can be invigorating. How rugged do you have to be to fight aliens without even bothering to put your shirt on? It must be stupid hot in that jungle, or else these two just have to show off their muscles to anyone who might be watching. It's meant to make you feel

powerful in much the same way that watching an action movie filled with explosions and fistfights is supposed to. It's a raw show of power, and you're along for the ride.

Except in games, you get to BE that person. You get to put that raw power to use mowing down monsters or laying villains flat with a punch. Win a love interest at the end of the game for your physical prowess. That's definitely a healthy start to your relationship. Someone who loves you for your ability to punch people in the face or shoot folks is probably not going to make for something stable long-term. I'm not a doctor, though. But I have owned a toy stethoscope at one point.

Well, that power doesn't always work out right. What happens when you're supposed to be this tough, skilled killer and you absolutely aren't up for the task? What do you do when you get cleaned out in the second level of *Contra*, or can't even get through the first stage? Maybe some people feel empowered to try harder to fulfill that role, but for me, it compounded the stress of my failures. Not that I was not living up to some imaginary character's hopes for me, but that I was a mockery of what I was seeing on-screen. I was far from that tough guy, and felt that I had very little chance meeting that level of skill that was implied in the character design. It only served to remind me that I wasn't this person, and was just another lousy player trying to feel tough.

I didn't think about this consciously. I'm not saying that. But I did feel a similar embarrassment to when I played and failed at sports. Like I was in a league I shouldn't be involved in, and that I should just step aside and let it go. I was never going to beat these games. I did not have those skills, and games had no interest in letting me practice at my own pace to get good enough. Just like basketball at school, it was something else I couldn't enjoy because the pressure was too much.

Becoming these strong characters did make me feel a sense of power. I won't argue that I didn't get a little feeling of strength from punching faces in *Double Dragon*. But it wouldn't be long before those tough characters would fall to my own flaws, exposing the unskilled player who was behind the wheel. And I would feel more discouraged than when I'd begun.

Kirby was the first character to take that pressure away. He was just this silly puffball in a silly world, and being him was less about feeling strong and more about helping others even if you were kind of a goofball. A marshmallow that can eat monsters and spit them out is kind of an odd hero, especially when he can't even handle a butterfly attack properly. He's stumbling, bumbling, but overall faces danger with a smile because he's out to help people. But he's going to dance and have fun while he's at it, dang it. This is an adventure, and even though people are starving, that's no reason to let yourself become grim and jaded.

Again, I didn't think of this exactly, but I could feel it in Kirby's appearance and his actions. I could sense that the danger wasn't quite as bad, and that maybe Kirby wouldn't mind if I screwed up a bit. You could see him making his own mistakes while eating fish (hook and all), or when a sneeze caused something to fall on his head. There was this playfulness in his demeanor and the things that happened to him, and it loaned the game a more playful nature. It made it feel okay to make mistakes because Kirby was always making them himself. It was okay to just enjoy the journey because Kirby was thrilled with every step you took. Any boss win was cause to dance. It was a celebration that you accomplished something, no matter how small.

Kirby's celebrations, combined with his goofy failures, made me feel like Kirby was just a good-natured, possibly unskilled person like me. It made me feel more at home in failing alongside him. Kirby didn't always win the day. He couldn't even float among the clouds without something strange happening to him (why did that cloud create clones? WHAT DOES IT MEAN?). He had bad luck. He would fail. But he'd bounce back and try again.

This is far from the attitudes of the tough guys, who were stone-faced and never admitted to the slightest failure. They didn't smile or seem like they were having fun unless their love interest hugged them at the end of the game, and even then, you'd usually get the same blank look from them with a heart over their heads. They didn't seem to feel ANYTHING no matter what you did. Well, besides disappointment when you couldn't do what they were meant to do.

This is probably starting to sound like I'm putting a bit too much thought into it, but there was a massive difference in character attitude between Kirby and the Belmonts, Mega Man, Mario, and other game heroes of the time. Even between him and most of the dour-faced anitheroes that dot almost every single modern game cover. Kirby's attitude has always been more about play and fun – about savoring that journey and what you do as you take it. Other heroes play to win, but Kirby is happy just to take you on a fun walk.

And this made me feel more comfortable with him. The stakes felt lower with Kirby there. When I won, I was rewarded with more than a glower and a walk to the next stage. Kirby would throw down and party when you won. It felt more like a journey you took together, dancing hand-in-hand over your accomplishments. And if you goofed up, Kirby was a goof-up too. You just made a mistake together. No hard feelings. Let's try again!

It felt like the game expected less of me just from looking at Kirby and seeing how he looked and acted. Even that softness in his appearance just added this playfulness and bounciness to the game. I felt safe with Kirby. I felt like things were more about fun than winning with him. That we could enjoy our failures as much as our successes, because there's humor in messing up. Like when he's running from the butterflies, when you stumble face first into a giant pig, or get blown up by something that looks like an elf with high explosives, that's silly and absurd. It's cause to laugh, and not to dwell on your failure because you're not some faultless hero. You're a silly marshmallow with a big heart.

This attitude helped me enjoy the journey with Kirby, losses and all. Failing was just something silly happening to you, but you could always try again if you liked! It's not an awful setback for a hero that needs to save the world from some evil spirit or machine army. It's a stumbling block for a puffy fella who just wants the stars to get food for him.

This look in Kirby taught me that the game itself, and not winning, can be the goal. That just taking those steps through a game world can be worthwhile on their own, especially when you're hanging with a hero who says that it's okay to fail. It's just enjoyable to be

out here with you, flopping around and dancing when you feel like celebrating. Story-wise, you may be letting down a world of people who need food, but from Kirby's look and actions, I felt like I was being told that it was okay. And even if I never made it to the end, that was all right, too. Such a clumsy hero wouldn't have been likely to defeat King Dedede anyway, so if you do manage to pull it off, I feel like Kirby would be as surprised as you were.

Tough heroes feel like they expect you to win, and that messing that up makes you a disappointment. I wasn't short on reasons to feel like a disappointment, so being made to feel that way in a game only made me want to inhabit their worlds a little less. I didn't want to push myself to learn because they didn't feel welcoming to someone with my skill level. I didn't feel like I was wanted here, because here I was again, holding everyone back.

Kirby was okay if I was just learning, though. He'd messed up a few times on his own, so if I did that too, it felt okay. It felt like I was fine to fail, and that it was all right if I needed to practice. And since I just liked taking the journey with Kirby, I soon started to build those skills I needed to move further and further. And as we got closer to the end, I felt more like I had to help this happy puffball who'd taken me through so much. This wasn't the same pressure as the strong hero, though, but more like a sense of companionship with someone who had helped me build myself up. I owed it to them to help them with their troubles, now.

Kirby showed me that it's about enjoying what you're doing in the moment that mattered. Games were something I desperately wanted to beat at the time, because I craved that sense of accomplishment that I really wasn't feeling anywhere else. That silly puffball showed me that there is value in the journey itself, though, and that even if you're just puttering around in a few levels, you're still gaining something of personal value. Be it a win over the game, a bit of practice that improves how you play, or the simple enjoyment of taking the journey at all, you're still coming away with something.

I used to have an attitude that not winning at a game made it a waste of time. Even if I enjoyed it, that time should have been spent on winning. It's the same with sports, yet again. If you're not playing to compete and win, then there's no value in playing at all.

Yet, when I started playing various things with adults who just wanted to enjoy the sport for itself, that feeling went away. I can enjoy a game played with adults who just want to enjoy the game itself, and even find my abilities with certain sports growing from the fun I have in practice. I doubt I'll ever compete at hockey, but I still like a friendly game here and there. And I actually halfway understand how to play, now.

It was finding that the act of playing was not wasteful, or that playing and enjoyment could be the goals in and of themselves, that I started to really grow, and also find happiness in my play time. Once I could let go of the need to win and just savor the journey, I started releasing that stress and pressure that made it hard to gain the skills to win. Kirby, from his appearance alone, tells you that it's all right to just enjoy every step. That anything you do in this world is cause to celebrate and be happy. You have grown from your time here, whether you beat the game or not.

It's the participation trophy, in a sense. It's the idea that simply taking part, and finding your own growth and place within sport and play, is something to be proud of. It's that you will find your own accomplishments in whatever you do, and that the experiences you find there are valuable whether you 'win' or not. And even if you did win, that those experiences aren't all that different from someone who didn't, in a sense. You've both simply grown in different ways. It's still good to win, don't get me wrong, but given that few people will ever become the very best in the world at something, perhaps it's time to look for the value we find simply in taking part in an experience and changing ourselves through it.

Kirby's cheerfulness steadily helped build me up, creating confidence within me from his look alone. His disarming features made it feel all right that I wasn't very good at games, and in allowing me to feel comfortable with my own skill level, I could then begin to finally build on it and start to take those first steps forward. Once I let go of that need to win, and instead found reason to celebrate in my own small accomplishments and growth, I could really start to find a place for myself in the world of games.

7.

“Growing up, I didn’t have a Nintendo system, I just had Nintendo Power Magazine, which was (I guess) cheap enough to be able to pay for yearly (\$12 a year). The magazine engaged my imagination about all of the possibilities that lay within. While I occasionally got to play some of the games at my friends’ houses, I was always limited to what they had, and even among my Game Boy-owning friends, no one had anything quite like Kirby.

I think I just liked that Kirby was an all new character in the Nintendo-verse. The strange round white puffball was so different from anything I had seen, and so when I asked my mom for a Game Boy for Christmas in ‘93, I asked for Super Mario Land, Link’s Awakening, and Kirby’s Dream Land.

Kirby’s aesthetics were so strange, with those weird bomb boys, those floating pig/dog heads that attacked if you tried to eat them, and the one-eyed laser shooting things. The tunes were out of this world, though. Super upbeat and catchy. I think I liked them more than the moment to moment gameplay of the game, which shifted from being really easy to hair-pullingly hard once boss time came up (at least for a 12 year old who barely played video games). It was such a strange dichotomy, especially with Super Mario Land basically being the opposite design wise (bosses were a cake, stages much more difficult), and it really threw me off.

Even still, I remember being very amped when I got to the stage with King Dedede, and after winning the fight after MANY tries, I was rewarded with yet another amazing track, which definitely went on my ‘video game music’ audio cassette I had been compiling for some time.

It’s been strange seeing the spirit of that game remade a bunch of times in various Kirby sequels over the years because, for me, nothing quite gets the magic of the first time I played it.”

– Shawn Alexander Allen, Artist, Writer, and Game Designer of Treachery in Beatdown City

Kirby's look helped me feel safe, then built me up. The levels made me feel safe, but then helped me build my confidence when things didn't seem so easy any more. The play style helped me hone my skills through making offensive abilities that were easier to aim and use. Everything in *Kirby's Dream Land* seemed built around that slow building of confidence and strength in a player who didn't have it. It was about making you feel safe in having less skill or different play abilities, and then allowing you room to build upon it. It was about making you feel comfortable there so you could accept yourself and grow.

Its music was also working at that as well, unsurprisingly. It's right there from when you turn on the game, a few moments after that happy little Game Boy loading chirp rings in your ears. Jun Ishikawa's opening theme to *Kirby's Dream Land* is quite short, but there's a strong sense of playfulness and fun within it. It's upbeat and happy, promising you some wild adventures when you're ready to come along for the ride.

If that cheerful ditty doesn't get you going, the stage music for Green Greens will have you tapping your toes soon afterwards. This beat is turbocharged with cheerfulness, hammering at your speakers with a relentless happiness and a surging sense of adventure. It's extremely catchy and infused with the kind of joy that will carry you through your whole journey through the game. It makes you want to run and feel the grass parting between your toes, wind blowing your hair in the wind. Or making Kirby's belly flap. I'm not sure what effect wind would have on such a floppy creature.

This kind of upbeat cheer and energy has become a staple of Kirby's adventures (ugh unintentional pun) for decades. Hirokazu Ando (another composer who worked alongside Ishikawa on *Kirby's Adventure* and many future *Kirby* titles, and who composed for many of them himself) mentions this musical feeling in an interview with Forbes.

"For a character like Kirby, who's exceptionally nimble despite having stubby arms and legs, I feel like the most suitable type of music has a fast tempo with frenetic transitions, as if the music

notes themselves are dancing around. Music like that naturally ends up having a richness that people don't get tired of hearing." (7)

Yet again, we see that cheerful tone from the play and visual style that makes it feel all right to just enjoy this digital world. There's no sense that there are high stakes if you fail in this music. There's no push to make you feel endangered from the creatures around you, or that you're a non-nonsense hero out for blood (give *Super C*'s first stage music a listen if you want those mingling feelings of heroism and danger). It's just this chipper tune that leaves you feeling like you want to run through the fields and be free.

This, like all other elements of the game, add to that feeling of safety and comfort, but with an empowering tone that's different from most games. You're not made to feel powerful by overcoming menace, though, but instead draw from an inner strength tied to helping this silly creature save its people. The stakes are still high, but instead of being gloomy and dark, the game pushes you to cheerful heights to keep you moving forward. You've got people to help, and it's going to feel so good to help them.

It's a different kind of attitude. You're not moving forward with thoughts of vengeance or anger, but instead through hope and heart. The Green Greens track is loaded with that kind of joyful hope, and the player can't help but get caught up in the feeling and carried along with it. I wanted to help Kirby when I heard that song, and couldn't help but find myself running along with him thanks to the song's upbeat tempo. I wasn't moving from rage, but from happiness.

This brought about a shift in my outlook on playing through the game, even if it was only subtle. This track was friendly and welcoming instead of being loaded with menace, so it didn't bring up a lot of those anxious feelings surrounding failure that often came with those high-pressure, challenging action games. Instead of marching forward carefully and cautiously, prepared to die at any moment, I felt compelled to move on so that I could help the people of Dream Land. I wanted to, and when mixed with all of the previous elements, I felt empowered to do so. I could do this, or at least, I was able to try my best and see what happened.

Still, feeling safe and comfortable isn't the entire purpose. You've still got to feel like your skills have grown as you play, which is where the game's boss music comes in. Your first encounter with Whispy Woods comes with a pretty menacing track – the sort of thing that wouldn't be out-of-place in one of those games about grim-faced ninja or monster hunters. It's a fast-paced onslaught of fear and danger, which is...pretty wild when you're fighting a tree that's kind of absently trying to drop apples on you.

I love this boss track. To this day, it's still one of my favorites. It moves like a freight train, always rushing forward with a high intensity. And it feels completely out of place when fighting against the cute enemies of *Kirby's Dream Land*.

It's perfect for it, though, if you've been following the logic of this book so far. The game has been a steady construction of confidence over the course of play, making you feel safe enough to build your skills, but then grow those feelings that you can play well in other games as well. The game is all about teaching you to be better, and then start to feel a confidence in yourself. Part of that confidence is in fighting things that do make you feel a twinge of fear.

Still, how do you do that in the first stage of a game when you still want the player to feel relatively safe? How do you mix those feelings of confidence and fear – of being unsure, yet also feeling accomplished and skilled? In this case, you have an absolute beast of a boss tune mixed with a softball fight against a confused tree.

Whispy Woods doesn't try very hard to stop you. If you stand near the foolish thing, it can't even hit you. Yet as you have this slow, clumsy showdown against an immobile piece of wood, your heart rate is being pushed to ridiculous rates by this boss track. The fight isn't all that exciting or challenging, even for a new or unskilled player like me, but that boss song had me gripping my Game Boy tight, absolutely tense at the excitement of this fight.

When I hit the boss for the last time and that explosion rang out, followed by Kirby's spirited dance, I wanted to dance too. I felt like I'd accomplished something great purely based on that menacing music. I'd seemed to have beaten the last boss of a challenging game based on how that song had sounded. It felt like a powerful

being had fallen at my hands, even though the game hadn't really pushed me all that hard. Still, the music, which captures the spirit of a moment, made me feel strong.

That's a lot of what I loved about music from those past eras of gaming. NES, Game Boy, and SNES music had to do a ton of the emotional legwork in games of the period. The visuals simply weren't up for the task of creating drama and emotional impact. Not that they didn't have a lasting impact on me in many ways, but most of the time, it was a connection between story, visuals, and most importantly, MUSIC, that made games so special to me, and why I had so many lasting memories of them.

Any early *Final Fantasy* game lived by its soundtrack. I remember Cecil's story vividly from *Final Fantasy IV* purely because of the music that played when he gave up being a Black Knight. My heart still races at the potential for adventure that came from the "Protect the Espers!" Track from *Final Fantasy VI*, and I still get a little misty-eyed when I hear "Celes' Theme". These songs gave many of these moments a beauty and resonance that made them explode out from their "simplistic" artwork. It made them feel vivid and alive, staying with me for decades.

This is how music can load something with so much power and importance to the player, and I believe that Ishikawa knew that when he created the boss battle theme. It was something that conveyed strength and fear, even if the battle itself couldn't convey those emotions on its own. It used that musical power to reshape the emotional connection of a moment and altered how that battle against Whispy Woods would be felt and remembered. The boss itself might not have been hard, but the music would make you feel like you'd felled a giant. That would stay with you, creating a powerful memory.

This surge of confidence, brought on by the music, made me feel like I was growing as a player. That I had gained enough skill to defeat something powerful, even though I knew I'd just beaten up the wimpy tree boss. I knew, intellectually, that I'd just beaten the first boss of the game and that I shouldn't be that impressed with myself, but emotionally, I felt something different. I was starting to get good at games. Or at least good enough to get somewhere.

I started to get that slight hint of confidence. And when I was able to beat the second, then the third, then the fourth boss as this music played, I could feel that I was getting somewhere. This stirring song was a huge part of that confidence growing in me, and that feeling that I could learn the skills I needed to play games, and that maybe I could enjoy these vicious, ruthless things that everyone else seemed naturally good at. Or that there were at least games out there that I could beat, feeling that sense of satisfaction that so many other friends of mine seemed capable of without the same efforts I had to put into them.

This music made me feel like it was finally possible for me to build those skills I needed in an enjoyable way. That I wouldn't have to practice and practice for months to no avail. That I was close to having the abilities I needed, but that I just had to push that little bit harder. This boss music made me feel that I could do it. That I could strike down something so seemingly powerful. Something that made my heart beat hard as I fought it.

The rest of the *Kirby's Dream Land* soundtrack would continue to play with this back and forth, hinting at menace with the halls of Castle Lololo, or calming a player in the late-game with the playful, floaty tracks of Bubbly Clouds. It was about making the player feel various emotions throughout their journey, constantly shifting back and forth between fear and calm at different times. It was about knowing when to make the player feel strong and powerful by overcoming challenges to these menacing tracks, then switching to something with a bit less pressure when things got harder.

It was always assuring and goading the player on, simultaneously. This mixture would be key, as a driving soundtrack throughout would have left the player with little time to emotionally recover, and could have had them feeling like they were constantly endangered. It would have undermined all of the work the visuals and play style did to make the player feel that this was a safe place to learn. Likewise, if it had all been calming, players might have never felt that rush of victory that would tell them that they were getting any better. They'd be left languid and almost-lazy, coasting through too-calm worlds that lacked a sense of danger. They needed a touch of both, or else it would break the lesson the game was

working to teach its players.

Ishikawa got it just right, though, knowing when to shift between calmness and tension, resulting in an experience that made me feel like it was all right to take the time to learn, yet somehow made me feel strong when I managed to spit apples at a tree.

8.

“After dinner with Granny and Pops, I made myself comfortable in their blue recliner with the squeaky creak, adjusted the lamp on the side table to shine the light closer, popped Kirby into my Game Boy, and spent the next hour running through Dream Land.

I still remember the soft feel of that old chair and the sound of the television in the background as I faced off against Whispy Woods, the lingering smells of dinner set against dueling with Kracko, and the final showdown with King Dedede as my grandmother checked in on me before bed.

Sure, it was a short and simple game even by the handheld standards of those days, but there was clearly lots of potential in Kirby. As the credits rolled, I was already looking forward to a sequel... after I flipped open the Nintendo Power I'd brought with me and looked up the code for Extra Mode, of course.”

- Matthew Green, Editor-in-Chief of PresstheButtons.com

Kirby's Dream Land was vital to giving me the space to gain the confidence I needed to be able to play games and complete them. I might not feel that same compulsion to complete games to feel satisfied these days, but it was highly important to me back then.

There's yet another part that I needed, though. Something only the Game Boy could allow in an era where all of my gaming failures were made public on the family tv in the living room. Privacy.

I don't know about you, but my ability to complete a task competently can be swayed a great deal by having an audience of any kind. I'm more than capable of doing my daily job, but if someone decides to sit right on top of me and watch me do it, I will pretty much leave them wondering why I have a job at all. I don't know what goes on in my mind, but being observed doesn't exactly

help me work or play at my best. There's this added pressure to succeed that just seems to make me crumble.

Games aren't much better. I've started doing YouTube videos for my site, IndieGamesPlus (we cover neat stuff if you like unique games and the artistic side of the medium), and the idea that someone out there is watching me play is enough to make me play so, so poorly that it's upsetting for me. That I'm talking, and people are listening to my dopey self try to commentate over the play, makes this even worse. I feel like I'm being scrutinized. Instead of making me perform better, I internally collapse. I desperately want to succeed while I'm being watched, but something inside me simply breaks down during these moments. I just don't do well when I'm being watched.

This made playing games on the family tv in the middle of the living room a bit of a hassle. In an era when most games were already quite challenging, and I already wasn't much good at them, having an audience wandering in and out of my play area made things even worse. If someone so much as glanced at the tv, I could feel that pressure mounting. Sometimes I'd hit a good groove and could forget it all, but those moments were pretty rare when I was first learning to play games. Usually I was failing, and having my brother or dad watching my loser show didn't help. Not that they ever said or did anything to make me feel that way, but it felt awful to be watched as I hurled poor Billy Lee into that stupid river in the middle of stage three of *Double Dragon* yet again. You know the one. Broken bridge. Idiot on the other side with a bat. Bad times.

This kind of pressure made it hard to succeed unless I miraculously had the living room to myself, which didn't happen often. There was also the constant battle for the tv, as the rest of the family might want to watch something or play something. You'd always find yourself being hurried along because someone else wanted something and you needed to share, and convincing folks that you couldn't just shut the game off and start right where you left off was challenging at the time.

So, this wasn't the most accommodating environment to learn how to be a Power Player. The Game Boy marked a big change for all of that, though, because it awarded me my own private screen and

play space, giving me room to fail without an audience (unless my brother felt like sitting right on top of me to watch), and I was free from having to share the Game Boy with anyone else (it was mine for my birthday). Save for being at the mercy of four Double A batteries, life was good.

Yeah, it was extremely difficult to see the screen. I basically needed to park a reading lamp in my lap to be able to play it at all. And that thing got HOT, and if you were caught up in a game, you might not notice until your leg really started to sting. Yeah, and some idiot could come up and swipe the button to turn it off on the playground if you played at school, which was a super real and extremely irritating threat.

But being able to play all by yourself, on something that no one needed to ask you to get off of (save for calls for supper, the bane of my childhood existence)? It was a life-changing device.

Kirby's Dream Land's design was much of the reason I was able to find my groove in games and slowly build up the skills I'd need to play them, but I don't know how well it would have worked if it hadn't been a Game Boy title. Being on the Game Boy, I could play it without having someone constantly looking over my shoulder, so I didn't feel like I was being judged or rushed. That took even more of the pressure off of me, again letting me relax and find my place. That it could be private, and that I could make mistakes on my own and deal with them on my own, made me even more comfortable in slowly training myself to play.

These digital worlds were uncomfortable places when I first found myself in them, after all. I never thought about how much comfort applied in learning to play and exist in them, but it's extremely important to your enjoyment of them, or even your ability to experience them. Without that comfort, you're painfully aware that you're a visitor in these digital lands, bumbling through the local customs as you struggle just to fit in and exist.

In the play language of *Kirby's Dream Land* and other video games, that results in stumbling into enemies, making mistakes, and dying. As you slowly make yourself at home in these worlds, which you do through learning the controls and movements and adapting to them

until they feel natural, you can go further and experience more within them. Once these customs become second nature, and you are no longer concentrating on which buttons do what but rather flowing through the space as if it were your own body inhabiting it, you find you are at home in these constructed lands. You've inhabited the digital space, forgetting your own body and moving yourself through your new frame of code.

When I first started playing games, this transition came hard, if at all. I could feel that I was helping Mario bumble through this space, but I had to keep peeking down at the controller to see where the buttons lay, looking back and forth between controller and screen as I worked up the timing for a jump. It was like having a whole new body, and getting its movements down required a great deal of thought. I couldn't get comfortable within it because I hadn't learned the movements well enough.

This break between control and play didn't really get much better without practice, and each game gave me whole new movements to assign to the controls. Eventually, I learned where the buttons lay, and could hit them without having to look down at the controller, but even so, I would still find myself thinking about which buttons I needed to hit in order to do what I wanted. A few milliseconds of concentration were required for every movement I wanted to take, rather than embracing the actions I wanted to carry out as my own.

I talk about this with horror a lot, but anything that breaks down your belief that you are the avatar within the game will harm your ability to connect with it. Sometimes, that can be as simple as having to think about the controls you need to press in order to do something, because you're still thinking of the avatar as someone you need to control, rather than an extension of the self in this digital world. For you to feel truly at home, you need to discard yourself and fully embrace your new life here. That means knowing the controls so well that they're second nature. When you become Kirby, then you can start to learn. If you're still thinking of sucking up enemies or pressing up to take flight, you're not ready yet.

That seems oddly deep for *Kirby's Dream Land*, but what I'm getting at is that comfort is a huge part of finding your skill at games. It was for me, which is why moving away from discomforts, like being

watched or having someone push me to get off the tv, allowed me to feel more at home with the game and steadily let go of the distractions and fears that were keeping me from embracing my place within *Kirby's* world. I was still stuck thinking of games like I was learning to drive a car. I was just someone steering a pudgy white (well, pea-green) tank around. I was someone steering an in-game character rather than becoming Kirby himself.

Once I was able to discard some of those distractions and challenges, I was freed up to feel my way through life as Kirby. When I jumped, it was because I felt I instinctively knew that I had to leap over an enemy or hazard. When I inhaled, it was because I felt that something was too close, having learned my ranges through practice. The game's design helped a great deal in learning these things, but it was that personal privacy afforded by the Game Boy that also made it possible.

The Game Boy is also an intimate device. It's the sort of thing you can curl up with, much like a book or movie, and let the world around you fade away a little bit. You're not the main spectacle in the living room, but are instead the quiet, near-invisible presence on its outlier, often lost in your own conjured existences. It was a lovely device that let me unplug from reality for a little while, and due to its proximity and privacy, I could forget my stresses a bit easier and become better.

Many of the first games I ever beat were on Game Boy, and I have no doubt that this privacy and personal connection was the big reason why. Finally, I had a system that I could hide my faults and practice without feeling like I was putting the rest of my family out. Finally, I could get lost in something all by myself, rather than keep getting drawn back by the needs and eyes of the rest of my family. I was free to let go of the world and start losing myself in these new ones I wanted to visit. And once I'd accepted my new role there, I could start rebuilding myself in these worlds and their needs, becoming one with them. Once these digital places were home, I could embrace my place in them.

“It was the first game I taught one of my younger cousins to play. He'd never seen a Game Boy before and Kirby's Dream Land was the one game I was most excited to show him. He asked what button to push to make Kirby punch the bad guys, and I said Kirby doesn't punch them, he eats them. He was terrified.

Why? Because Kirby was designed to be accessible. I loved Super Mario Land, but figured it would be too tough for him. He was 5 at the time, and Kirby seemed like the best way to teach him how to play a game. He did eventually play through and enjoy it after getting over the initial revulsion.”

– Paul Harrington, developer at Super Walrus Games

The idea of mastering games is almost funny, as now, I am not so concerned with ‘beating’ games as I used to be. Beating *Kirby's Dream Land* was such an important part in giving me the confidence to keep playing games, but now, I rarely finish games unless I outright adore them or I need to complete them for review. I used to feel like a failure when I couldn't finish them before, but now, I'm just happy to pick up games to goof off with. I'm not terribly worried about what I accomplish within them so long as I take something away from my time in these places.

The longer I spend in game worlds, the more I simply enjoy just being there. I don't have to beat something to feel completeness with it. I'm just happy to let go of the world and be somewhere else for a while. It's the journey of playing through a game that you remember when it's all over, right? It's not just the end credits that you're looking to see, but rather the travels and adventure you find as you make your way to those credits. Yes, it can be very satisfying to see those endings, but it's in playing your way through to them that you get the best parts of games.

I rather enjoy simply wandering through these places. I'll try to survive as best I can, but there's a joy to be found in just making your way through the beautiful coded landscapes that many developers and artists have created. Taking a moment to savor the landscape, or the flow of a fight, or the cadence of language and story, are a great part of the game. And sometimes, when I find myself at a wall of challenge I cannot surpass, I don't mind letting go. Sometimes, it's just that something in my life has made it difficult to play, and I have a hard time coming back.

I still love many games I haven't finished or cannot finish. I adore *Contra 4*, but I doubt these hands will ever complete it. I don't know if I would love it more were I to finish it, either. The completion of games isn't the factor, but rather what I feel as I play through them. Be it a thrill of challenge or a love of narrative or something that makes my heart swell in seeing it, games have so much more to offer than just through their completion. It's the journey, not the destination.

But finding that destination and connecting with it was very important to me in this time in my life. Back when games felt like yet another thing I was going to be awful at like sports, or something I did that bothered the other people in the house, the Game Boy and *Kirby's Dream Land* came along and allowed me my own private getaway to someplace else. Here, I could be strong (eventually). Here, I could explore wild lands and defeat monstrous creatures (eventually). And I could feel safe in growing my abilities here, without prying eyes or the demands of a game seemingly born of cruelty.

Now, I'm happy just to take the walk, but maybe that's because I have little to prove any more. Maybe it's because I've witnessed the rise of some truly impressive artistic work in games – movements that use the journey to teach empathy and understanding – that I look for more in the journey than in its completion. Maybe I just want to feel something as I play, now, rather than be savaged by a game. And I've beaten my share of hard games. So, now I don't really care if I finish them.

I don't know why, but I do know that I needed to feel that I was good at something, and that I wasn't putting everyone else out in

trying, before I could get here. I needed to feel what success was like, and the Game Boy and *Kirby's Dream Land* helped me get there. It helped me feel that I could learn games at my own pace. That I could build those skills in a place that accommodated my growing skills. That I had powers that would let me tackle things at my own pace, or let me run away if things got frightening.

I was a kid with anxiety and low self-esteem. I didn't like that I was bad at things I tried to do, but felt like the gulf between myself and skilled players was too far. I felt like I didn't have the base skills at games and sports that everyone else had, so I was learning to discard these things from my life. I was getting those same feelings from games, and was just about ready to toss them aside, even though I did love them in my own way.

Why keep going with them? They were something else I was painfully bad at, and would never see any sort of success in. And beating games was what it was all about, right? Like in sports – even when you're just a few elementary school kids playing soccer in a field – you are playing to win. If you aren't winning, why are you even here? Why would you even play? Please move aside so someone who can win can take your place. If you don't have the drive to compete, games have nothing to offer you.

This mindset was and still is common. It's the sort of mindset that, when discarded, sees results immediately. I have a job outside of video games where I help children with sports of various kinds. The thing I see, time and again, is that the competitive kids suck a lot of the fun out of it for anyone who does not possess their mindset. If competition and winning is all they care about, they cheat and they shout and they fight when they aren't winning, and gloat and make fun when they are. Not everyone, of course, but a large majority of people with that highly-competitive motivation can't tolerate it that someone else might just be playing because they like the game. They likely want to win too, but it isn't a huge personal failure if they don't.

This is all just anecdotal evidence from what I've seen, and hardly encompasses all of sport and the good players who take part in it, but it's the kind of misery I've experienced often. It's an unnecessary mindset that takes away from the game for all

involved, and when those kids aren't there for whatever reason, you see the non-competitive players thrive. People can get very good at the sports and games they enjoy simply through playing them. They can get better than those hyper-competitive players because they're finally able to flourish in an environment of their own.

This comes from that pressure coming off of them. If you're not worried about getting yelled at for not being good enough, you can actually concentrate on just playing the game for its own sake. You can start picking up skills rather than finding some means of actually getting the ball from those players who think they're far better than you. There's room to try things, because the focus is now on playing the game well because you enjoy it, rather than because you're afraid or distracted by the potential consequences. Joy is a far better motivator than fear, and I've seen some incredibly skilled players come out of their shells in stunning ways when no one is screaming at them to pass the ball.

I felt a lot of this same attitude coming from games, growing up. Their highly-challenging nature demanded that you find success and get better instantly, but without giving you the room to really practice and take care. Also, in my own mind that was riddled with self-doubt and gloomy thoughts of not being good at anything, I wanted to win at something. I wanted to be good at anything. It was a tough combination, which is why I, yet again, felt like video games were just something else I was never going to be "good" at.

Yes, starting stages are easier, but for someone without the base skills to play games, they're still often a bit too much. What you might think is easy is absolutely devastating and impossible for another. This reality often stirs skilled players to tell others to "git gud" and the like, when they had an unfair advantage to begin with. Maybe that hand-eye coordination came easily for you. Is it really fair of you to tell someone else to "git gud" when you yourself didn't earn your skills to begin with, but were just born with them? Where do you get off telling someone they just need to be better when you didn't do anything to earn your abilities besides existing?

You see this whenever someone hints that concessions should be made for disabled players, or if someone even implies that a hard game could use an easier mode. There's this need to defend games

as they are, supporting whatever the current image of an appropriate “player” is. It’s the artist’s vision! We can’t change the game because then casual players would be able to play it, and they wouldn’t be playing it right.

I have a hard time articulating why someone would not want others to be able to play games at their own pace and with their own skills, because I cannot understand the attitude. There seems to be this thought that winning these games should be a sacred thing reserved for only those with a certain amount of practice or a specific skill set with button presses. It’s like it’s supposed to be a special club for only a select few, and that everyone else must be kept out to prevent impurity. It has to mean something when I say I beat *Battletoads*! If not, what will my gaming friends think of me?

I don’t understand it. Same as I didn’t understand it in sports. The need to win, and to be a winner, at all costs can be highly motivating for those who have it, but it’s downright poisonous for the rest of us who are just trying to have a good time and play for fun. It seems especially ridiculous with video games. What do you care what difficulty mode I play on? Why does it matter to you whether I play hard games or not?

I can see that beating games might make you feel special or accomplished, but this isn’t the Olympics or some national team. It’s not even a local team. It’s you and a clutch of code, and you’re able to hit the right buttons enough times to get to the end of that code. Not to disparage the amazing things people do when playing games, but I see little reason to have any concern about what people do with their own games at home. Like I said earlier, no one is making you play on an easier mode, and no one cares if you find your own ways to make a game harder. Your accomplishments are your own, and as an adult, I can tell you pretty safely that no one cares about what games you’ve beaten. I’ve checked.

I don’t know it to the extent that many other players have suffered or found themselves unable to play something based on skill or ability, but I do know the feeling of not having those base skills needed to play games. I know what it feels like to pick up games and lose in the first few levels, feeling like they’re just not something for you. I know what it feels like to be overwhelmed and

give up.

The developers behind *Kirby's Dream Land* saw that many players were floundering, struggling to gain the tools to play games in a world where no one much cared if they did. The arcade mindset of savaging players until they coughed up their money was still there, and if you couldn't finish a game, you'd better keep on practicing. Only the elite get to win (or those with enough time/money/patience).

Yet here was a game that specifically set itself up in ways that ran counter to the mindsets of the time. The enemies were cute and unassuming, creating a sense of power and calm within the player. Your attack powers were strong and lashed out in a wide cone, allowing players some room for error when they tried to fight. Foes took a while to really attack, giving you a lot of time to find your feet in the game. It was all designed to take pressure away, rather than put pressure to perform on you. It was about calming you down rather than winding you up with challenge. It was about finding the fun in play, and not screaming at you that you needed to be better through its high demands.

It would do all this while teaching players the basics of jumping, aiming attacks, and exploring a game world. It slowed down and paced things so that you had time to learn, and then you could apply those skills in a relatively safe area, developing abilities that you could take into other games. It made room for players of various skill levels to play, as well as teaching them the basics that they would need to take into other games.

Kirby's Dream Land was designed by people who cared about those players who were left behind. The ones who couldn't quite keep up with those of a 'natural-born' skill. It wanted to explore through fun and play, letting players become better at their own pace in an environment that taught through enjoyment rather than punishment. You learned because you were more free to experiment and take on the skills, rather than forced to adapt because you were going to lose over and over and over again.

It changed my whole life, honestly. After *Kirby's Dream Land*, I wouldn't say I was an overnight success, but soon, I was finding

that I was winning at the games that used to crush me. I soon beat *Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins* after I managed my win at *Kirby*, something I never would have thought possible at the time. Beating a *Mario* game – one with all of that precise jumping and possibility for failure – was never going to be in the cards for me.

But *Kirby* taught me how to jump right so that I could land where I wanted to. If I didn't, I could always fly away. Not being able to take off did put some stress on me, but I soon found that I was quite capable of hopping where I needed to. I'd learned what I needed to play something harder from this easier game.

Easy was never the sole point behind the design of *Kirby's Dream Land*, though. If all they wanted to do was make a game that didn't push the player all that hard, it would have been a snap. *Rampage*, the game where you guide giant monsters to stomp cities flat, is an easy game. You will never lose at *Rampage* so long as you keep playing it, as you never die permanently and never lose any progress. Eventually, you will win if you keep pressing buttons.

Kirby's Dream Land is also an easy game, but it's one that aims to teach you with its every action. You can fail just enough that progress and practice matters, steadily teaching you how the game's played. Its abilities encourage you to learn jumps, flight, and your vacuum attack to keep you alive, and you're given enough health to allow for some mistakes. You're not allowed to constantly fail, but are given a fair amount of wiggle room to learn.

Maybe there's not enough room for every player to learn in *Kirby's Dream Land*, but it sure was enough for me. I got to where I desperately wanted to be, and found that I now had a chance at games. Most importantly, I remember where I learned how to play in *Kirby's Dream Land*, and how important it was to me that I'd finished it.

I liked *Rampage* because it didn't challenge me, but I never felt any sort of special connection with it like I do for the pink puffball. *Rampage* didn't seem to care if I learned anything as I played. *Kirby's Dream Land* still expected something of me, even if it was far less than that of games at the time.

And if you learned how to play from *Rampage*, I'm not trying to belittle your accomplishment. *Rampage* simply allowed me to be lazy, and my unskilled self was in no mood to fight it. Is that part of the argument behind why games shouldn't allow for easy modes, as players will fall into the trap of playing lazily and never learn? If it is, again, does it really matter what one takes from games? Does it matter that easing through *Rampage* is all that someone wants from games? Is adversity and challenge all we can take from our digital playgrounds?

Clearly not, judging from the amazing art being done with games now. We're seeing that combat and clashes are not all that games are capable of, and that this sense of exploration and personal connection are other things games excel at, allowing for some powerful, empathic experiences. It's a wonderful time to be playing games, and if you can open yourself up to that, you'll find some life-changing stuff. And most of it is even less challenging than *Rampage*.

At the time, I wanted to win at something. I wanted to feel that I was skilled enough to finish a game on my own. To feel like I deserved that win. It's not all I ask of games now, but back then, as a 'loser' kid, I just wanted to know what winning felt like. And *Kirby's Dream Land* showed me while challenging me just enough to get me ready to love games even more. It got me to where I needed to be to enjoy the medium going forward.

Without that, I don't think I would have stuck around to see all of this wonderful work being done now. I wouldn't have gotten a chance to find out that it's all right to just love the journey, and that you still get something out of a game you don't finish. I'm not just saying this because my backlog is insurmountable in this lifetime, too. There's so much value to be found in just the experience of playing games, and that value is found whether you finish many games or not, or whether you buy into the necessity of competition or challenge or not.

And this mindset, and my ability to play games at all, all came from *Kirby's Dream Land*. I never would have moved forward in games without help from the developers and their careful, patiently-designed playground that was built to help me move forward and

let go of my stresses. I never would have started covering indie games and writing books about games were it not for several strangers taking a look at games and saying “We can build these so that more people learn to love them and play them.”

I needed those generous, kind folks to look around and say that bringing more people into games can only do them good. That we have a duty to create spaces where more people can play. That games belong to us all, and that they’re a medium for good that doesn’t need a big CHALLENGE barrier standing at the door to give them value. And even if you do want challenge, there’s value in knowing where you want that challenge to lie, and that different players are challenged by different things.

The team behind *Kirby’s Dream Land* wanted something more from games, and wished to give something more to their audience. Their kindness and thoughtfulness is what allowed me to find my own space in games, and founded a career that I would derive a great deal of joy from. I love working in games, and love the work being done to help even more people play games through charities like Ablegamers.

I feel like this medium is continually enriched by bringing more people into it, and that games have the power to improve our lives and truly connect us to the people around us. The more who can take part in that, the better I feel things will be.

For me, this attitude started with *Kirby’s Dream Land*, and is something I feel has only grown stronger and more important as the years passed. It’s a gift from the people who created it, and a happiness which I could never, ever thank them for enough.

10.

"Kirby's Dream Land was one of the few games that I played religiously as a kid. Looking back, when we first moved to the US from Japan, I remember my father taking us to a local video game shop to make me stop whining. He got me a Game Boy and let me choose three games. One was a Ninja Turtles game that I never beat, the second was a submarine game that was way above my English level, and the third was a game called Kirby's Dream Land that had a fat balloon-like character named Kirby.

The gameplay was unlike any platformer. Kirby could suck up just about any enemy and spit them out at another. He could also float across the entire stage with a gulp of air. Those are things that not even Mario, Sonic, and Rockman could do. I liked that it let me go with a different approach for each playthrough, and would do things like try clearing the game without floating once, and whatever other silly challenges I could come up with. There wasn't any save files and it was a relatively a short game, but it was also the first to make me experiment with how I played instead of focusing on clearing the stages.

And I wasn't kidding when I say that I played the game religiously. I'm pretty sure I got all kinds of bad karma for doing this, but when my family would go to church on Sundays, I used to ask if I could 'go pray in the back.' My mother thought I was some super good boy, but in reality, I just had my head down playing Kirby's Dream Land on mute like a little degenerate. I eventually got caught one day when I got too brave and turned up the volume."

– Sato Negishi, Editor-in-Chief of Siliconera

Kirby's Dream Land allowed players of all skill levels to play and find fun. While it might not go far enough for some skill levels or personal abilities, it was an important step in creating a mindset that all players have some value, and that all people deserve to enjoy games.

I talked a whole lot about how the game took the pressure off of me so I could grow, and how, without *Kirby's Dream Land*, I likely would have given up on games altogether. How I was a weak, uncoordinated child who had no aptitude for sports, or really much of anything else. I was not someone who felt all that comfortable in their own skin, like I was some sort of clumsy pilot at the helm of a complex flesh machine, unable to make it do what I wanted no matter how hard I tried. Nothing gave me much solace from this. Not even games.

Kirby's Dream Land marked a transition from this place in my life. Not a big one, as those steps would come later in my life, but it was one of the first times I got to feel success. This was important to me, as I finally started to feel like I could accomplish things, or that not everything would demand more of me than I was capable of. Still, I don't think the game's only value to me was in letting me win. Like I said, *Rampage* allowed for the same thing, but without that sense of growth or accomplishment.

It still wasn't THAT much of a victory, though, was it? I still had only beaten a game that was just moderately pushing me. But it had helped give me some of the skills I'd need to go on to play other games. It was a valuable stepping stone to greater accomplishments, and it showed me what I could do if I practiced and put my mind to it.

But that's not the most important part, either. *Kirby's Dream Land's* greatest achievement was in making me feel comfortable being myself.

I was someone who wasn't very good at video games, and *Kirby's Dream Land* made that feel all right. That I could finish the game at all was a big part of that, but it was still one of the most vivid memories I have of feeling all right in my own skin. I felt like I had the motor skills to do something I wanted, and that my abilities were enough to get me through the challenges of Dream Land. I was good enough to win the battles I wanted, and share in the journey of this cute character.

I did have some things to learn, but they all felt reachable in my current state. The game wasn't constantly reminding me that I was

unskilled through Game Over after Game Over, but instead opening up to me so that I felt I had the skills to move on.

I often got stressed when playing games, but *Kirby's Dream Land* made concessions so that was all right.

I often felt overwhelmed when playing games, but *Kirby's Dream Land* was designed so I could escape from those feelings if I ever needed to.

I often felt unwanted when playing games, but *Kirby's Dream Land* was built to be accommodating to what I was capable of, creating a space where I felt welcome and accepted.

Games were a big space where skill was mandatory to remain, and I felt it was another world, like sports, that I would have to leave behind. I had nothing to offer them, and I simply wasn't welcome. I didn't have the base skills needed to play, and no game was willing to give me a chance to learn them. I'd just have to give up and walk away, or "git gud" somehow when nothing was willing to give me the space to do so.

Kirby's Dream Land gave me that space where it was all right that I wasn't that good at games. It was fine that I wasn't a super-skilled player out to achieve those high scores. I was a clumsy, bumbling kid still learning to get comfortable with controllers, and the game gave me a space where I could feel comfortable, as well as fulfilled, in playing through that space.

It was all right that I was bad at games. It was all right that I would need to make a ton of mistakes. I was all right as I was. I could still play and have fun.

I did have fun in the first stage of *Contra* and in the many areas I couldn't complete in *Mega Man*. I did enjoy my time in those coded places (especially with the Game Genie, another vital tool in building skills). But they weren't welcoming to me. I needed to be so much more if I was to feel any kind of comfort in them, and I knew it. They were worlds I dabbled in, like the sporadic times I'd throw a basketball around the neighbor's net, but nothing made me want to stay. I was never going to get good there, because the

demands were just beyond me. Even if no one said so, I felt like I wasn't good enough to stay.

Again, *Kirby's Dream Land* basically said that my skills were fine. I was fine just the way I was, and I could find success and fun here. I could get better if I wanted, but my skills were fine as they were. I felt like games were something I could enjoy and take part in as I played *Kirby's Dream Land*. Before any thoughts of getting better or overcoming great challenges entered my head, what I felt was this sense that "I can play this." It felt like it had been built for me. That it was made to make me feel like I could play games.

The game made me feel all right for being who I was. It was all right that I was clumsy and had slow reflexes. I was all right as myself, which made me feel all right being myself as I played it. I didn't get some huge influx of confidence or anything, but this was the big moment when I felt accepted through games. That I was going to be fine just as I was, and that I didn't need to stress about what I had to become to fit in with entertainment, fun, or my peers. I wasn't lacking, here. I could just play and be me.

It's this acceptance of the self, funny enough, that allows us to grow. When I always felt like I needed to change to fit in with sports or peers or games, my skills stagnated. The pressure kept me from being able to build, as this sense of overwhelming failure made it impossible. I could never get out from under this sense that I was about to fail and upset people, so instead, I withdrew. And in withdrawing, I couldn't grow. The fear and pressure kept me where I was.

When I got that sense that my skills were fine as they were – that no one was judging me for who I was – I started to get better. I started gaining confidence in myself. Very slowly, admittedly, as I began to gain a bit of skill at playing games. It was slow going, but before long, I found myself beating other games. I beat a *Mario* game on the Game Boy! After playing *Super Mario Bros* years before, this is something I never could have imagined being possible. I was growing, though.

I was growing in other aspects of my life. A few years after the game came out, I finally found a sport I liked (martial arts were so

much easier to get into as my failures didn't take down a whole team). I wasn't a world champion, but I had found an activity where I could find success on my own terms.

I started making friends, too, finally finding a group of great buddies who loved games. Decades later, we're still friends.

I'm not saying *Kirby's Dream Land* made all of this happen, necessarily, but it was an early step in accepting who I was, and feeling that I was fine as is. With this sense came the ability to move on, as not every failing came with this sense of catastrophe. I wasn't a total failure because I couldn't do something. Rather, I could find enjoyment in my experience of the thing, and grow naturally through spending time with my hobbies and self. I could grow by enjoying who I was.

Kirby's Dream Land and its developers made a kind of space where a kid like me could accept themselves and feel some success in who they were. In doing so, they created a space that allowed for growth, both from the skills I'd need to play games, as well as in finding a place where I could finally accept who I was and naturally grow through enjoyment and play. It created that space where I could be me, and where it was fine to be where I was in my life. I didn't have to beat myself up for who I was. I could just enjoy that time and begin to reshape myself.

Maybe I'm overreaching with a child's game. Or maybe, like the message behind *Kirby's Dream Land* itself, the smallest and most unassuming amongst us can be the most powerful and helpful if they wish to be. That we can do great good with the simplest of ideas, and that perhaps, we can be good enough just as we are if we love ourselves and others without fear. Maybe the tiniest, most innocent of games can hold out some hope that we'll grow into the heroes we once idolized, and that their stories of courage, and finding courage within ourselves, can inspire us more than we had ever imagined possible.

For me, *Kirby* told me something about myself that I didn't know before: that it was all right to be who I was. That my skills were all right. That I could be happy with myself, and that I could grow once I found that core happiness.

Kirby, round and chunky little thing that he was, didn't come down on himself for his marshmallow shape and lack of any offensive skill. All the little fella could do was eat and spit stuff out. Did he let that crush his dream of saving his people? Did he get down on himself and give up? No, he got his squishy little frame in gear and set out to save the world.

In his journey, an uncoordinated, clumsy kid saw a bit of himself. In using the power to eat to fight back, he showed me that maybe I could be using the skills I had in creative ways to survive. Maybe they weren't typical fighting skills, but they could be used to help people and save the day. Maybe there was something in me that could find success and be happy with myself.

In helping his people, I feel that Kirby found happiness. In doing it alongside him, I feel that I found happiness and acceptance of myself as well. And in doing so, I found the peace I needed to start growing as a player and person, soon beating games and finding a place for myself in sport (yay martial arts).

I truly love that about *Kirby*. It was a game designed to help kids find the joy in games, and in its design, telling them that it's all right to not be good at something to begin with. You can build the skills you need, and you can do so in an environment that is built to be comforting and safe for you. Games can be built to welcome new players, or players with different skills and needs, rather than chase them off with high demands. Games can be a space that welcomes as much as it demands skill and chases off the unworthy. There is home for us all.

Kirby is welcoming. *Kirby* is accepting of you whoever you are. *Kirby* thinks you can be a hero no matter who you are. And it's that feeling of being a hero – that your contributions, no matter how small you may think they are, or how unworthy you feel they are – can save the world. Can help those you care about. Can be enough to make a difference, even if you doubt yourself.

That we can discover who we are through applying ourselves and facing adversity, and that we may find we have more strength than we could ever imagine.

That in finding who we are - that we are okay as who we are - and in knowing that, we can gain a strength to bring good to the world around us. To grow into who we need to be.

Kirby means so much to me. He helped me learn to love games by showing me that they could love me back. He helped me see that I was good enough as I was, and that I could toss away that doubt and self-loathing in the pursuit of play and fun. There were places that were ready to welcome me, rather than me having to force myself into a position I never felt like I fit into. I could belong somewhere, and that I was all right as I was, somewhere.

Even if that somewhere wasn't real, its effects were. And I cannot thank its developers enough for helping me find hope within myself.

And I feel that this design philosophy has helped shape gaming in positive ways. By designing to be more accommodating of players with different skillsets and play styles, we have opened games up for more creativity. In designing to allow less of a focus on skill and reflexes, we open games up to new players and new ideas, and these, in turn, have built whole new genres. When we're not just slamming players with games that require twitchy play, we allow games to be about more things. Even just the revelation of allowing players to play at a more relaxed pace allows for games that don't aim to stress the player out, instead finding the joy in exploration and simpler activities. It doesn't have to always be about combat, and even if it is, combat doesn't always have to be about only appealing to the most skilled of players.

There are so many people who enjoy and play games now, and I feel it stems from games like *Kirby's Dream Land*. In creating a game that allowed more players to feel like they could succeed, it created ground where those players could build their skills for harder games, but also let them see that not everything had to be about challenging their reflexes. There were games about other things that could appeal to them.

From these mindsets, we see the open world exploration of many peaceful games. We see the joys of finding a life among friends in *Animal Crossing*. We see the movement towards various difficulty

levels in games, which allow for more people to enjoy things at their pace. We see the embrace of the varied needs of players with new styles of controllers to help the disabled, as we know that so many people worldwide love games, but just need a developer to reach out with a way to make them feel welcome.

I'm not trying to disparage hard games. They have a home in all of this too, but the attitude that games need to be hard to be fulfilling is of no use these days. It's the sort of thinking that *Kirby's Dream Land* runs counter to, instead promoting the idea that there are games for all. That there is a joy and empathy to be found in games, and no one should be denied it.

We can do good for all of us, in games and outside of it, due to the lessons of our beloved pink puffball. For now, and for the players of the future.

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Joel is an advocate for games for all, hoping that everyone can find enjoyment through the medium in their own way.